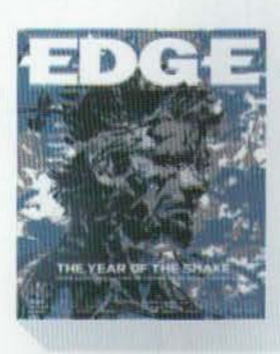

VIDEOGAME CULTURE
MARCH 2007 £4.50
EDGE®
NINTENDO | SONY | MICROSOFT | PC | PORTABLE | COIN-OP | SET-TOP | ONLINE
THE YEAR OF THE SNAKE
INSIDE KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS AS THE NEW METAL GEAR SOLIDIFIES
FEATURES CAN SEGA RALLY ITS FORTUNES? SUPER MARIO SUNSHINE'S HIDDEN HEART IS DOWNLOAD CONTENT A RIP-OFF?
PREVIEWED HELLGATE: LONDON BLACKSITE VIRTUA FIGHTER 5 GOD OF WAR 2 DEF JAM: ICON SIM CITY DS BURNOUT DOMINATOR
REVIEWED CRACKDOWN SUPREME COMMANDER GHOST RIDER WARIO: MASTER OF DISGUISE HOTEL DUSK ROCKY BALBOA







It's 20 years since Snake first crawled onto MSX. Twenty years since a young Kojima found himself already sick and tired of gaming's continual obsession with violence. Twenty years of break-neck progress, and yet *Metal Gear*'s mix of pathos and playfulness remains as unique an undertaking now as it did then. The series has so long been accepted as a pillar of PlayStation that it's easy to forget how downright odd and unwelcoming it is: an exhaustively baroque plot, those interminable cutscenes, the sudden-death gameplay.

And yet it endures, and no doubt partly because of that uniqueness. Its contradictions – the macho posturing of Snake set against an emotionally overwrought storyline, the cinematic pretensions combined with a gamer's instincts – have enabled it to appeal to a wide-ranging audience which might otherwise have been alienated by one trait or another. There's certainly no shortage of players who scoff at the softies who cried over Aeris, but are themselves quick to choke up at the memory of Sniper Wolf's operatically tragic ending.

Two decades on, what does that uniqueness represent? Is it evidence of a path not taken, a route games could have followed but rejected in favour of conservative blockbusters? Or is *Metal Gear*'s time up? As games have evolved, have they found new, more organic solutions to the limitations which first frustrated Kojima 20 years ago, and then again a decade later? The answers will come in the shape of *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots*, and in our feature starting on p54 we dissect the series' legacy, examine the new game's future, and sit down with Kojima to discuss his own prospects. It's a series that leaves some cold, and one whose complex evolution (from Snake to Raiden to Big Boss, from *Solid* to *Acid* to *Portable Ops*) has left many bemused fans in its wake, but it's one that can't be ignored. Just where might the next 20 years take it, and us?



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"When people tell me they are happy, my ass begins to twitch."





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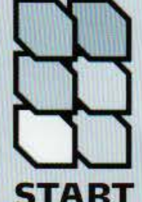
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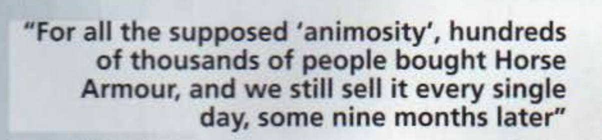


SOFTWARE

What's in a game?

One year on, downloadable content is building steam, but uploaded discontent shows that some have been scalded

In early April 2006, Bethesda released its first piece of downloadable content for *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. The Horse Armour pack brought with it a number of other firsts, too, in being one of the earliest provisions of game-expanding content for a full-price retail release on 360, and the first to crystallise the angst and fist-shaking postulations that rose up within some online communities when Microsoft first announced and explained the suite of channels that the Marketplace and microtransactions system would host, at the GDC in March 2005. And so, a response direct from the horse armourer's mouth: "There was an outcry because we were really the first ones to do it, and so it was partially a backlash against us, and partially against the idea in general," says **Pete Hines**, VP of marketing and public relations at Bethesda Softworks. "If we had started out at a lower price, there still would have been a reaction. Bigger content, still a reaction. We were going into uncharted waters so we did the best we could to look at what other stuff was available on 360 – themes, picture packs, etc – and what they cost, and try to find a price we thought was reasonable. We did the next one lower, that seemed to go over well, so we stayed there for similar ones and went back up for larger ones like Mehrune's Razor and Knights Of The Nine."



"For all the supposed 'animosity', hundreds of thousands of people bought Horse Armour, and we still sell it every single day, some nine months later"

Horse Armour was the start of what's been a year containing various outcries, protests and debates about the power of Marketplace, a content delivery service designed to empower the player, but that some players have come to see as a force for quite the opposite. Few would argue that Marketplace – with its freebie treats, demos, preview footage and its fundamental duty to Xbox Live Arcade – has been an exploitative service overall. But one aspect of its operation has been the target of some flaming rancour from various forums and other outlets (regularly including the comments sections of posts found on MajorNelson.com, an official Microsoft blog heralding the release of each piece of DLC): game expansion – follow-up payments that extend the functionality of a piece of software that's already been purchased. And Horse Armour, likely due to its cost and relative worth – 200 Microsoft points (£1.70) to be able to kit out a player's steed with protective plating, a minuscule addition given the content offered in the £50 release – came under damnation that, at best, branded it a rip-off that consumers should boycott as they negotiate an imminent but necessary evil, and at worst was the beginning of a new era of corporate corpulence where publishers exploit the opportunity to fly-fish ever more money out of the wallets of already-committed consumers. But, as with so much collective invective from the gaming community, widespread doesn't necessarily mean ubiquitous: "The thing is," says Hines, "for all the supposed 'animosity', hundreds of thousands of people bought Horse Armour, and we still sell it every single day, some nine months later. So you'd be hard pressed to tell me we shouldn't have released it and nobody wants it. Clearly, people playing *Oblivion* feel otherwise."

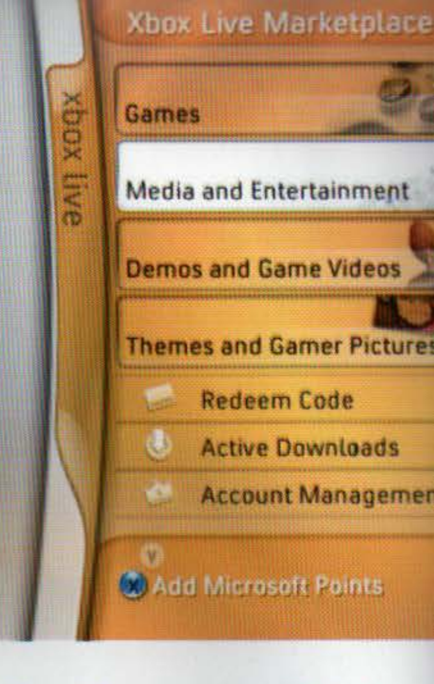


DLC often consists of the kind of content found in special edition releases of games, such as the inclusion of Vergil (above) as an extra in *Devil May Cry 3*'s redux. Such packages rarely court controversy, even though some result in dedicated fans re-buying

Subsequently, it should be noted, Bethesda's support for the game has been more warmly received, and felt much less peripheral. But it does show how wildly different the economies – and perspectives borne of them – of Marketplace and shop floor are. Purchase a full game, and there's a completeness to the ownership that's filled with near-infinite potential where it's now yours to explore for the rest of your time, even if, as many players are quick to admit, you rarely ever see more than just a fraction of that content. Buy *Oblivion*,


Game guides are now an accepted shelf presence, even though their proliferation – outside of their roles as well-produced keepsakes or convenient references – asks the question of how difficult it can be to unlock the entirety of a game's content without some sort of external help


The cost of every piece of content currently available on Marketplace stands at roughly £4,000, equivalent to 80 full-price 360 titles, a number that would rise significantly if the realities of today's sale and/or pre-owned prices were taken into consideration

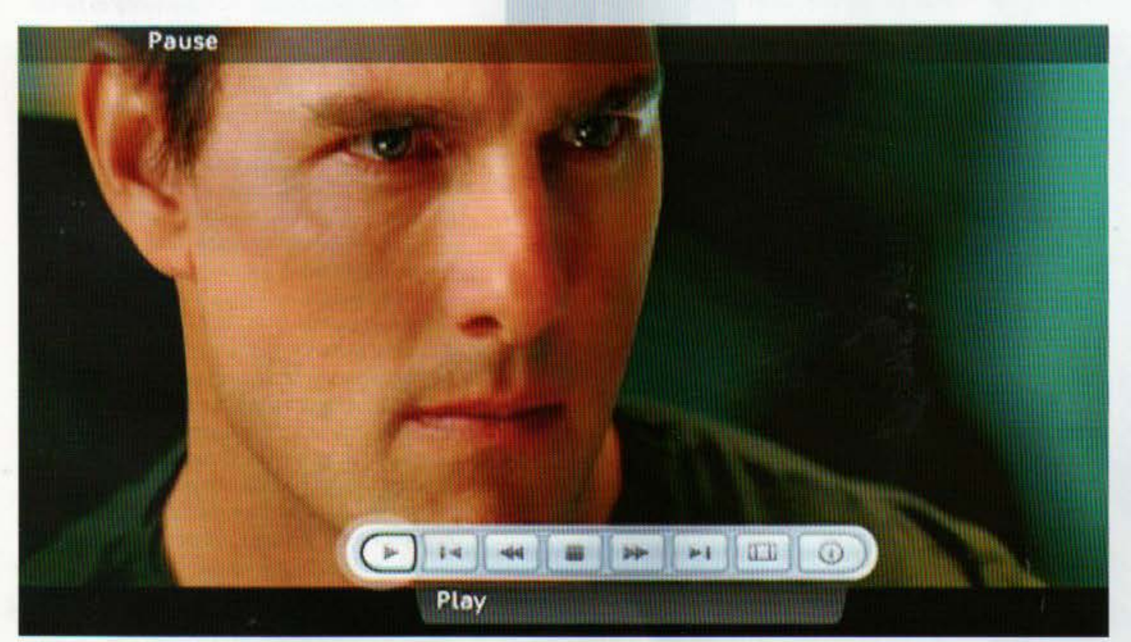


and the pounds-per-hour playtime quotient is theoretically incredible; buy the Mehrune's Razor quest for 250 MS points (just over £2), and that quotient plummets, but yet many a player seems to have accessed and enjoyed the pack even though its relative value falls more in line with Horse Armour than the retail game itself.

The greatest and most persistent of complaints have come not because this new content offers an expansion of the original experience, but because it can feel more like a contraction – the sense that the game you've paid for is an incomplete experience, speckled with glaring holes rather than invisible sockets. *Lumines Live* left many a sore blog post in its wake, the game retailing for the maximum price of a Live Arcade title to date (1,200 points, £10.20), rife with modes but visibly limited due to the multiple 'docks' in place for further expansions to be released and attached at a later date. It threw up screens telling the player to buy the relevant expansion to continue playing through certain modes as often as it did new skins, it seemed, resulting in rallies against its demo-like status; if its content was presented in a smoother manner that didn't so often expose those holes, then it would likely have been much more smoothly received, limiting any catcalls to the relationship between cost and content.

Ridge Racer 6 prevents players without Gold-tier Live accounts obtaining certain cars, as they are conditional upon winning quotas of online races

Unlock keys have been a recent culprit called into the dock, downloads so small (118KB, or less) as to be seen as proof that they're doing nothing more than opening up content that's already contained within a purchased disc; early examples include freebies such as *Ridge Racer 6*'s vehicle or *Dead Rising*'s costume unlocks (the former game, incidentally and notably, prevents players without Gold-tier Live accounts obtaining certain cars, as they are conditional upon winning quotas of online races). More recently, *Cabela's Alaskan Adventures* offered a 100-MS-point unlock key for a pack – containing, among other things, new clothes and weapons – whose visual assets, it has been assumed, couldn't possibly be contained within the download itself. So, why is there such a sense of violation? Is it the invasion of the perceived contract that's long been in place between player, publisher and manufacturer up until the departing generation? We've long had game discs hosting features that few would claim entitlement to – the 'test' areas of *Zelda: Wind Waker*, or the Hot Coffee of pre-controversy *GTA: San Andreas* – but then none were officially turned into a subsequent revenue stream. Is it the artifice of the delivery method, and timing? The additional content available in special edition releases (e.g. *Devil May Cry 3*) is typical of what Marketplace can and sometimes does offer, but these appear as entirely new shelf products in the high street space – not on the dashboard – some time after the original's release, and rarely kick up any grumbles. Or is it



360's non-gaming DLC has evolved from movie trailers into full movies, but the passive nature and clearly defined role of such media – along with Gamerpics, dashboard themes and similar – has given rise to little ambivalence compared to the videogaming content











With the microtransaction-focused iteration of *Gran Turismo HD* now downsized to a concept demo, questions of its value to less fervent players – who might have spent less than the cost of a full release – will not be answered

PETE HINES,
VP of public relations and marketing at Bethesda



Now that you've got such a fluid space for releasing content on a console in between *Elder Scrolls* games – are there temptations to lift ideas from *Elder Scrolls V* to feed *Oblivion*, and do you think there's an opportunity to introduce certain aspects of its story and universe to *Oblivion* players?
No, that's not something we'd ever do. First of all, we want our games to stand on their own. You don't have to have played *Morrowind* to enjoy *Oblivion*. We don't want to start artificially tying them together. And, our ideas for things with DLC are things that we had either thought about for *Oblivion* originally but they got dropped in favour of others, or are things we thought of after the fact and wanted to do. Even with a game as huge as *Oblivion*, you have to draw the line at some point or it'll never be finished.

Just before *Morrowind's* release, the idea of PC mods being made available for the Xbox version was being mooted, which never officially came to fruition. Given XNA Game Studio Express, do you think that, later down the line, you could see yourselves selling 360 owners tools to create and distribute their own content for *Oblivion*?
No, I don't think it's something we'd ever sell like that. If there was a way for folks to be able to make their mods or plugins freely available on 360 like they are on PC, we'd be all for that. We always have been. Currently the console doesn't support that kind of functionality, and I don't know if it ever will. Obviously you have concerns about the kind of content being made available, and whether people are messing up your game with their plugin. Right now it's a purely theoretical discussion because I don't see anything happening in that area any time soon

simply the need to send out a message that a slippery slope won't be tolerated, a prosumers' self-defence mechanism (with 'kneejerk' reserved for the most scabrous of reactions to perceived racketeering) aiming to make sure that those in charge know that this fragmentation of content represents a retail model that needs to be handled without offending gamers? There's currently no way of peeling back the circumstances behind the conception of the DLC – for example, its appearance on the disc doesn't negate the possibility that the publisher and developer didn't put extra resources into the project in order to capture the extra return – to point a watertight finger and claim that the content was amputated from the main game experience simply to be held back as a fleecing trickle of a revenue stream. And it's possible that the role of paid-for unlock keys, in the face of the negative PR thrown up in certain circles, may now simply be removed from the process, the content retained and released in a more timely manner to avoid raising hackles; players are none the wiser, and none the angrier.

So, when did work on the downloadable content for *Oblivion* begin? "It started a couple of weeks before the game shipped, but we had been thinking about it even before then," explains Hines. "Really, once we locked the content for the game, so you aren't still changing the game while you're fixing bugs, the content folks start getting itchy to do more stuff. It takes some time because not everything we worked on got released, simply because we didn't like it or it didn't work like we wanted."

And has any of the success of the DLC been a surprise? "No, it hasn't. *Oblivion* is a huge game that encourages and allows folks to keep playing and doing new things. So giving them stuff they can add to their existing game fits well with what our game does well. Yes, we had a long-term plan and continue to execute on that plan. It's not something we're going to do forever, but it's allowed us to dedicate manpower to creating some stuff we think people will like and keep them interested in the game. With the recent announcement of the game's official expansion pack, *Shivering Isles*, I think even more people will pick up the game again to take their character and go play and experience something completely different."



The Vice City OST CD boxset contains exclusive cheats for the game, a content-unlock of sorts that avoided any controversy thanks to its idiosyncratic nature, and the speed at which those codes could be disseminated to gamers via cheat books and sites

The MMO space is potentially another nettle patch for Gold Live subscribers, with *Phantasy Star Universe's* monthly sub being an outlay too far for some, leaving them to veto it in preference of the PC version





Those most exposed to gaming's rackets over the years, real or perceived, will obviously sway towards the least flattering of explanations. Not so much out of pessimism but maybe thanks to the fact that gamers have been sold equally arguably 'incomplete' experiences, in a variety of ways, for many years, but the methods are either widely accepted as norms, or are never attached to a particular game publisher or, as with 360, a hard-wired infrastructure. Videogames are often poor exhibitors of their own treasures, trapped between the need to hide their secrets away for them to remain a surprise and the risk that players may never unearth them, or never be pointed towards them; the idea of any given player, without recourse to a FAQ or guide, being able to achieve 100 per cent completion in *Canis Canem Edit*, or ever practically discover the wealth of adroit content present in *Metal Gear Solid 3*, is unfeasible. And so saviours have always been required, both free and independent (forums, peer discussions, FAQ sites), and commercial and controlled (official-branded guides, magazine-mounted tips books, premium-rate phone lines, cheat cartridges).

Most recently, it's the ideas put forth in Microsoft's debut definition of the microtransaction that have caused unease with some, brought to market by the bête noire of gaming's public-domain watchdogs: EA. Both *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07* and *The Godfather* on 360 have been followed by Marketplace releases that offer shortcuts for cash-rich, time-poor players to bypass in-game unlocking requirements, purchasing maximum golfer stats in the former and $100,000

CHRIS ALLCOCK, designer on Kameo

When did you start to make plans for *Kameo*'s DLC?
Co-op was something that we felt would enhance *Kameo*; we had been certain even since the early tests that it was going to be a lot of fun in the action sections. That said, we were also up against a deadline – the launch of the 360 – and if we didn't focus our resources on the singleplayer then the multiplayer would inevitably have suffered as well. Fortunately, we now had all of the options that Marketplace represented at our disposal and so our networking engineers shifted their goalposts, transforming online co-op into DLC while the rest of the team were equally busy getting the rest of the game finished.

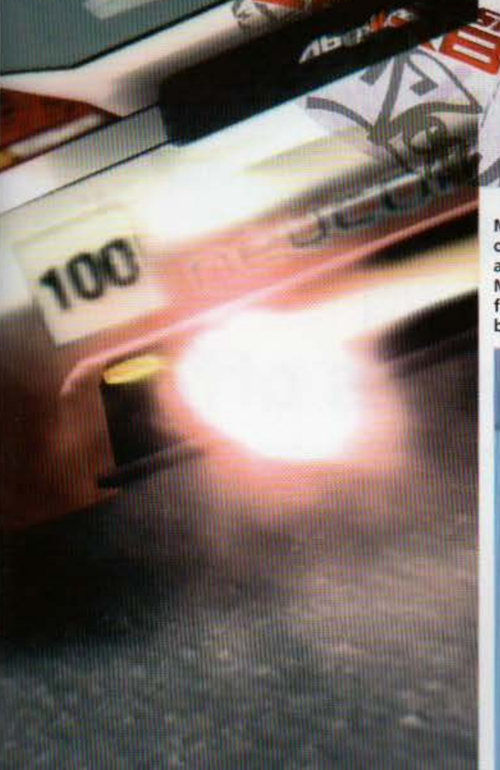
Has the level of uptake for post-release content over the past year been a surprise, or not? And how did the DLC come about – internal ideas, player feedback etc?
We're not sure any result – apart, possibly, from no uptake whatsoever – would have surprised us. The whole idea is just so new; in many ways it's our job to test the waters, putting the content out there and seeing who buys – I think gamers are doing the same. There's no perfect formula that means everybody will buy, say, a DVD – I'd expect the uptake of Marketplace content to be every bit as volatile as other retail channels. In *Kameo*'s case, we'd had a lot of fun ideas during the making of the co-op pack that we wanted to try, and the game had already been released, so we'd had a chance to soak in the public's reactions. A common comment was that the game wasn't as long as was expected, and some people felt that they wanted more of a challenge.

Thanks to DLC, we were able to present the Power Pack as a second, harder quest of sorts that could be played from the outset over Xbox Live, not to mention integrate new ways to use the multiplayer (like the Rune Battle mode). Within the space of a year we'd been able to improve the game in ways we knew fans of the game absolutely wanted, something that would never previously have been possible without a sequel or director's cut... and if you were happy with all that the original game had to offer, you didn't have to spend a penny.

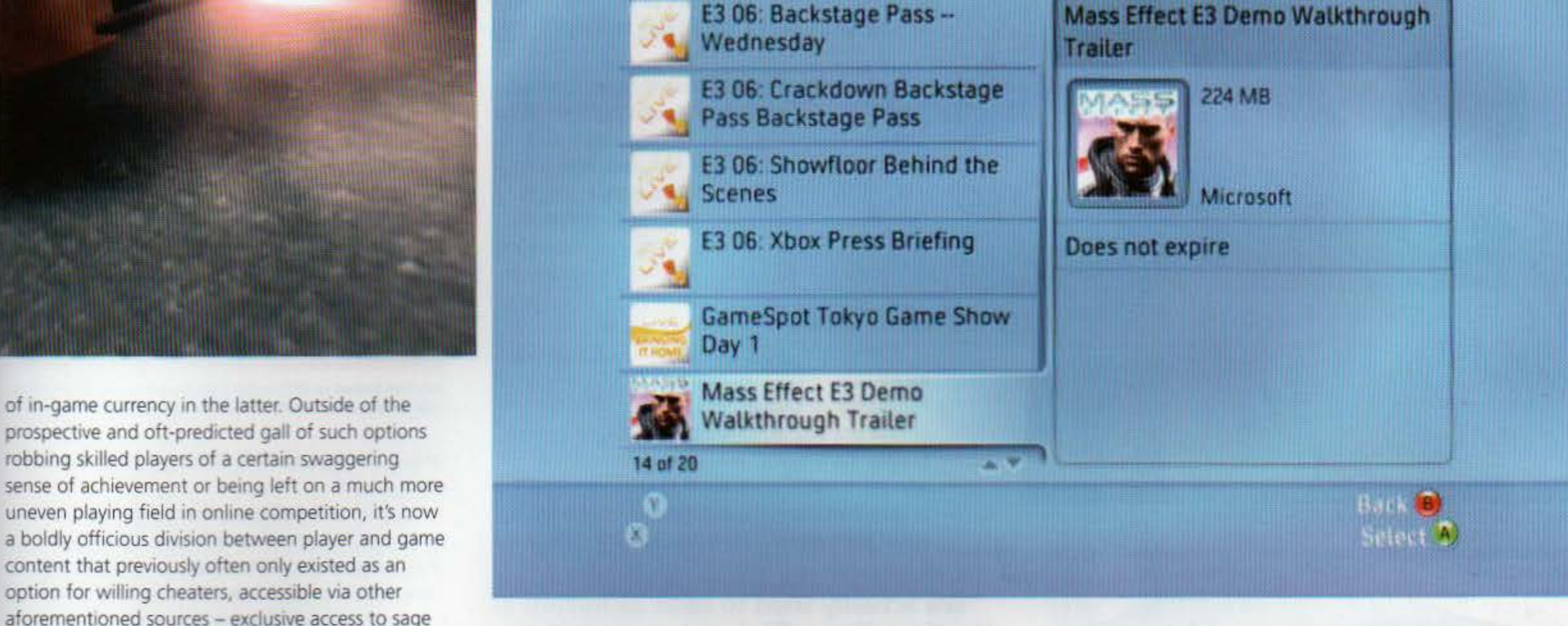
"During development there was a sense of devious satisfaction; we hadn't announced our interntions, so not only did we have the advantage of knowing what our audience wanted, but we got to surprise them, too"

How did the development team responsible for the DLC feel? Were they itching to move on, or thrilled to be able to revisit the game and iterate new content with the benefit and experience of hindsight?
The team behind both DLC packs was a subset of those who had worked on the main game. Throughout the development period there was a sense of devious satisfaction; we hadn't announced our intentions, so not only did we have the advantage of knowing exactly what our audience wanted but we got to surprise them with it, too.





Microsoft's Bringing It Home campaigns – downpours of timely material released to coincide with 2006's E3 and Tokyo Game Show – have been some of the Marketplace's most successful initiatives, providing fresh trailers, demos and other exclusive trinkets, bypassing the need to wring it through the press



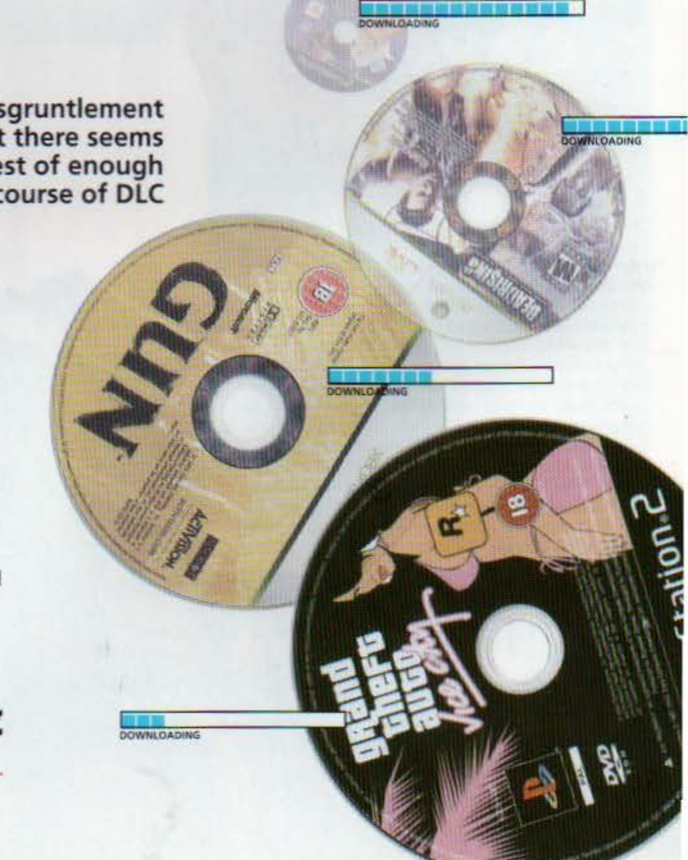
of in-game currency in the latter. Outside of the prospective and oft-predicted gall of such options robbing skilled players of a certain swaggering sense of achievement or being left on a much more uneven playing field in online competition, it's now a boldly officious division between player and game content that previously often only existed as an option for willing cheaters, accessible via other aforementioned sources – exclusive access to sage knowledge long being a selling point for cover-mounted tips books, for example.

Further kindling comes from *The Godfather* offering unlocks for high-powered weapons, then simply placing them in the game world, still requiring wads of in-game cash for purchase (although this is made clear in the accompanying download description). And strategy-tutorial videos for *NCAA 07 Football* and *Madden NFL 07* have been made into purchasable content, relatively cheap but still mud in the eyes of some given the increased RRP of Xbox 360 titles. These videos have also been castigated for the feebleness of strategy actually contained within. It's a charge that could just as well be levelled at, say, Bradygames' free video strategy downloads for *Saints Row*, which typify the diluted, all-bases waffle that can sometimes bulk out guidebooks but is, once again, widely accepted when distanced from Marketplace; not so much a case of Bringing It Home as just being Too Close To Home, maybe. However, the example of *The Godfather* given above is one that's down to more than just perception, since cheats for unlocking extra cash were present in the PS2 and Xbox versions, but lopped out for 360 to enable them to be monetised; and that now perhaps raises a genuine issue of consumer information that may come to be addressed as part of game coverage offered by the specialist press.

It's only been one year since 360's DLC catalogue began to properly populate, and not yet six months with all three console kings running their online facilities in the same field; the market is still far from terraformed, however industriously console manufacturers pump content through it.

Pester power and genuine disgruntlement may have been registered, but there seems to have been no protest of enough consequence to alter the course of DLC

The pester power and genuine disgruntlement of citizen journalist may have been registered, but there seems to have been no protest of great enough consequence to alter the charted course for downloadable content in any significant manner. That may be yet to come, and the power play between what gamers expect, and what publishers think is expected of them, will still be full of jostling, however anguished the accusations or arch the intentions that can be respectively attributed to either side, and it's difficult to not feel that there's still legroom to be explored. But any comments from the honestly peeved or professional moaners, in tandem with the continued proliferation and uptake of DLC, lambasted or otherwise, now stand as confirmation that this new dimension of console gaming is powered by the oldest of market imperarives: if we keep buying it, they'll keep selling it.



BUSINESS

Gamecock takes off

Stupid name, serious aim: can Texas-based Gamecock revolutionise publishing without developers chickening out?

"Any time art meets commerce, art generally gets steamrollered," laughs publisher **Mike Wilson** (left, in the chicken costume). It's a familiar story – so familiar, in fact, that Wilson is telling it for the second time in a decade. But on this occasion, he's hoping the ending is different. Six years after departing publishing label Gathering Of Developers, Wilson and business partner Harry Miller (in the hat) are getting back into the games market with a new company, Gamecock.

Formed in 1998, Gathering Of Developers was meant to be more than just another publisher. Putting the developer first was at the forefront of their strategy, and that meant allowing them to keep the IP rights, and avoiding sequels and licences. It didn't work. In 2000, GOD was sold to Take 2 Interactive, and Miller and Wilson were out of the business. "It was devastating," sighs Wilson. "Harry and I left thinking we would never come back."

"We actually tried to raise 22 million at the time. Five million got us started, but nothing more. It was only enough to set up an office and get a staff together"

Fury (see boxout on p16) comes from Australian developer Auran, with the aim of becoming 'the ultimate competitive online RPG'

Despite an initial investment of five million dollars, GOD had run out of money. "The main thing just came down to funding," explains Wilson. "We actually tried to raise 22 million at the time. Five got us started, but nothing more. It was only enough to set up an office and get a staff together, and continue looking for the rest of the money while we shipped a couple of games."

But even though Miller had been CEO of Relic,

Newswire



Capcom refuses to pay and win

The row has escalated between Capcom and the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences, a body whose aim is to 'promote awareness of the art and science of interactive games and entertainment', over its annual awards ceremony. Capcom claims its games have not been shortlisted for awards despite being nominated, as the company has not paid for membership of the AIAS.

But AIAS president Joseph Olin said: "To be presented an award and be formally submitted, you have to be a member of the AIAS as a publisher," he said, adding that Capcom had been approached and asked to join. Other non-payers, and non-winners, include Tecmo and Eidos.

A statement posted on the Capcom website read: "Capcom remains unsure as to the value of being an AIAS member. Does our company really need to pay tens of thousands of dollars in order to present awards to our own games?"





and Wilson had worked at both id Software and Ion Storm, shipping the games was harder than they had expected. "We didn't have a good balance of smaller games or console games or anything like that. Ours were all big, cutting-edge technology PC games, and what happens with big PC games is they all slip." GOD was caught in a loop – with no money, it couldn't finance games, and with no games being released, it couldn't make any money.

After selling up, Miller and Wilson explored various projects, largely outside of the games industry. But, ironically, it would be those slipping titles that would bring them back to the business. "Quietly, all of these games that we had signed came out and were doing really well with no one steering the ship," says Wilson. Tempted back to help Take 2 run the label again, he immediately found himself faced with the same frustrations that had made him leave the industry in the first place. "I went to an E3 as Mike from Take 2, took all these meetings, saw the frustration: Warren Spector and Alex Seropian and all these guys saying, 'I can't get an original game green-lit to save my life.' I tried to sign some games like that for Take 2. I don't want to cast any stones, but politically, working in a big publicly-funded company, it just wasn't going to work out."

And thus Gamecock was born. But this time around, Miller and Wilson were determined not to suffer the same fate as GOD because of underfunding. Figuring they needed twice what they'd wanted to start their previous company in 1998, they started looking for financing, determined to raise the entire amount in advance this time. Focusing on investors outside the games industry eventually paid off and, fully-funded, they set out to put together a truly balanced portfolio of

Hail To The Chimp

Developer: Wideload Games
Platforms: 360, PS3

"When you have a kid, you don't sell him into slavery in some stranger's salt mine. You put him to work in the salt mine you have in your own backyard," explains Alex Seropian, CEO at Wideload Games, when asked about the importance of allowing a developer to hold onto its IP. Wideload Games was so impressed with Gamecock's business model that it was willing to wait a year for Miller and Wilson to get their money together so that it could sign with the publisher. The resulting game, and the follow-up to 2005's *Stubbs The Zombie*, is *Hail To The Chimp*, a beat 'em up-based party title set in a cartoon animal kingdom. With a focus on multiplayer modes and a satirical slant, *HTTC*'s central goal remains endearingly simple: "If you're not laughing while playing a party game," says Seropian, "it's because the developer threw a lousy party."

Mushroom Men: The Spore War

Developer: Red Fly Studios
Platforms: Consoles and handhelds



Mushroom Men wedges the player into the perspective of a three-inch-high Mushroom Man, before sending him into a series of battlefields taking in Swiftian versions of familiar household environments. Although details are scarce at the moment, gameplay seems to mix frantic hack and slash with the potential for more _Pikmin_-esque strategy. With roughly ten levels, _Mushroom Men_ may be a small game in more ways than one, but the promise of multiplayer battles and an emphasis on creative – and unexpected – use of environmental objects may add some lasting appeal to a game that is already shaping up to be delightfully odd.







Hero

Developer: Firefly Studios
Platforms: 360, PC

Rather than opt for a sequel to its successful _Stronghold_ series, Firefly instead chose to create original IP, and the result is _Hero_, a dungeon crawler set in an immersive and elaborate underground realm. "So many games that have dealt with this subject seem to follow a set of conventions first set down in the '70s: chests of gold sitting around with a few monsters obligingly waiting to be slaughtered. Wouldn't the creatures have run off with the gold by now? Don't they eat? What if they need to go to the toilet?" asks lead designer Simon Bradbury, before adding, rather ominously: "Well that's where we come in!" Firefly is billing the results as a '_GTA_ for goblins,' a soundbite that, coupled with the team's skills in simulation, is an intriguing proposition.

games that could withstand a few titles slipping, and including consoles as well as the PC.

The approach may have changed since GOD, but Gamecock's aim remains the same. "We really see ourselves as providing a service to the developers," says Wilson. "We have to provide them with every possible way of reaching the consumer. We don't want to own everything. We just want to have good relationships, and be the most attractive avenue for independents to reach their audience. And that's through all means: on the shelves, digital distribution, every single thing that EA can do for them, we want to do, but without doing all the things that they wish EA wouldn't do for them."

And crucially, a key part of the plan remains allowing developers to keep the rights to their own IP. "If I'm running a publishing company, my business is publishing games, and there's plenty of money in that business," explains Wilson. "As long as I have rights to the game and rights to first say on the sequel, I have no problem whatsoever letting artists keep their IP. I don't ever want to be in the situation where I'm forcing somebody to work with me because I own their property."

It's a bold move, but Wilson sees a place in the market for companies like Gamecock, lean organisations that take big risks on small projects. "The problem with this industry right now isn't that people don't want to do original things, it's that all the money is coming through these big publicly-funded companies that have the same issues. It's not that they're stupid or scared, they just have all of these artificial pressures created by the fact that they have quarterly demands, and no matter how well they do, they are expected to do half again better next year. There's a huge gap between these giant companies and these tiny, underfunded companies. It's a gap a mile wide, and I'm sure, if we do well, there will be other publishers coming in with our model."

The strategy appears to be working so far, as Gamecock has already signed some intriguing titles. And true to their word, all five games announced as part of the starting line-up are original IP. "One of the first teams we signed is Firefly," says Wilson. "These guys made _Stronghold_. It sold a million units, and they still own the _Stronghold_ name. They came to us, and said, "We're perfectly willing to do _Stronghold 3_ for you. Or, we can do this original game, _Hero_." Harry and I immediately latched onto this original





Insecticide

Developer: Crackpot Entertainment
Platforms: DS, PC

The team behind *Insecticide* boasts some of the people responsible for *Day Of The Tentacle*, the *Monkey Island* series and other LucasArts greats, but while this new title is an adventure game, it seems desperate to be a lot more besides. Merging a complex narrative with film noir overtones – fast becoming urban gangsta's replacement as theme du jour – *Insecticide*'s most innovative elements may be the inclusion of gunplay and multiplayer modes. How that will mesh with the relatively sedate pace of the adventure genre remains to be seen, but the bootleg success various SCUMM titles have found on the DS means that at least the odd mix of platforms may prove more successful than expected.

game, because you could see in their eyes that that's really what they wanted to do."

Even though Gamecock plans to embrace alternative distribution models like digital downloads – trends that could one day make publishers obsolete – Wilson feels that the industry will always need some form of publishing infrastructure. "Someone has to put the money in – that's really what a developer needs a publisher to do. Maybe after we make some more teams rich, they'll fund their own stuff."

Wilson is confident that this time, he and Miller have created a publishing model that works, whilst still keeping the developers protected. "The difference is that last time, we were really on a crusade to try and change the industry, and this time we're taking advantage of the fact that the industry cannot change," he says. Perhaps the most telling indication of the company strategy is the name itself. "Calling ourselves something like Gamecock is putting our money where our mouth is, and saying that our brand isn't what's important – we're going to brand the developers. I believe that the only way a gamer will form a relationship with their favourite artist is if they happen to know who that artist is. Who made the great game they loved, and who made the shit game they hated? Right now, the idea that you're lumping all that into some publishing label is ridiculous. It's so hard for the consumer to even tell in that logo soup on the back of a package who actually made this game. Gamecock is a way to make sure that we never take ourselves too seriously. We'll be the ones in the fine print on the back of the box."

> **"I believe that the only way a gamer will form a relationship with their favourite artist is if they happen to know who that artist is"**



OUT THERE



DANCE DANCE EVOLUTION

Two years ago it was a public employee insurance agency, now it's schools which are trying to lure the fattest children in America on to *DDR*. West Virginia, which has the USA's highest rate of childhood obesity, is to put a *DDR* machine in every public school in the state, in the hope of luring its pupils into dancing the pounds away. But although the insurance company has already set the precedent, it seems the obesity epidemic is overtaking even the hyperactive demands of *DDR*. The original study found that some students lost around 10lbs through playing the game, but the new data suggests that regular *DDR*ing is only managing to prevent any further weight gain, rather than having a slimming effect. Perhaps the authorities should consider the *Wii Sports* diet instead, since that's already credited with wiping away 9lbs in just six weeks (http://wiinintendo.net/2007/01/15/wii-sports-experiment-results).

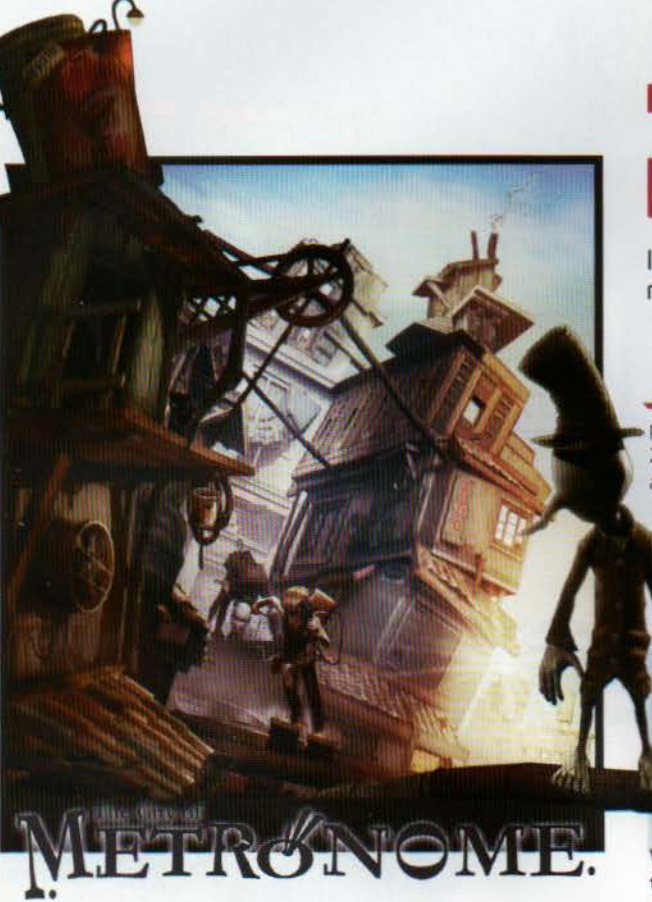
• http://tinyurl.com/yv4va3



Fury

Developer: Auran
Platform: PC

Ambitious, potentially to a fault, *Fury* aims to take the FPS and RPG genres and mash them all together inside an MMO framework. Offering both solo and group play, there's ample indication that the team behind this blending of acronyms, who have worked on titles such as *Ultima Online*, *Star Wars Galaxies* and *Need For Speed Underground* between them, have ideas to match their all-encompassing design. Featuring a new character system which allows players to switch classes between battles, adding strategy to the fast-paced skirmishes, another neat idea is allowing the game's separate servers, known as realms, to compete against each other in instanced war zones.



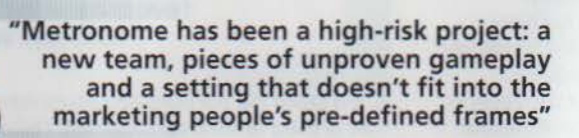
INTERVIEW

Positive vibes

Its city of dreams has still to become a publishing reality, but Tarsier Studio keeps on building

Metronome's designer Bjorn Sunesson, pictured in the throes of last year's E3

The City Of Metronome is one of those projects that have the more attentive gamers frothing at the mouth while publishers scratch their heads. Since its debut at E3 2005 presented an entirely new MO for the action adventure – you record sounds and use them as tools and weapons – its creator, Sweden's Tarsier Studio, has fallen silent amidst the persistent murmur of its new-found fans. As CTO **Andreas Johnsson** and designer **Bjorn Sunesson** reveal, however, time hasn't stopped in this enthralling world.



"Metronome has been a high-risk project: a new team, pieces of unproven gameplay and a setting that doesn't fit into the marketing people's pre-defined frames"

What's happened in the world of Tarsier over the last two years?

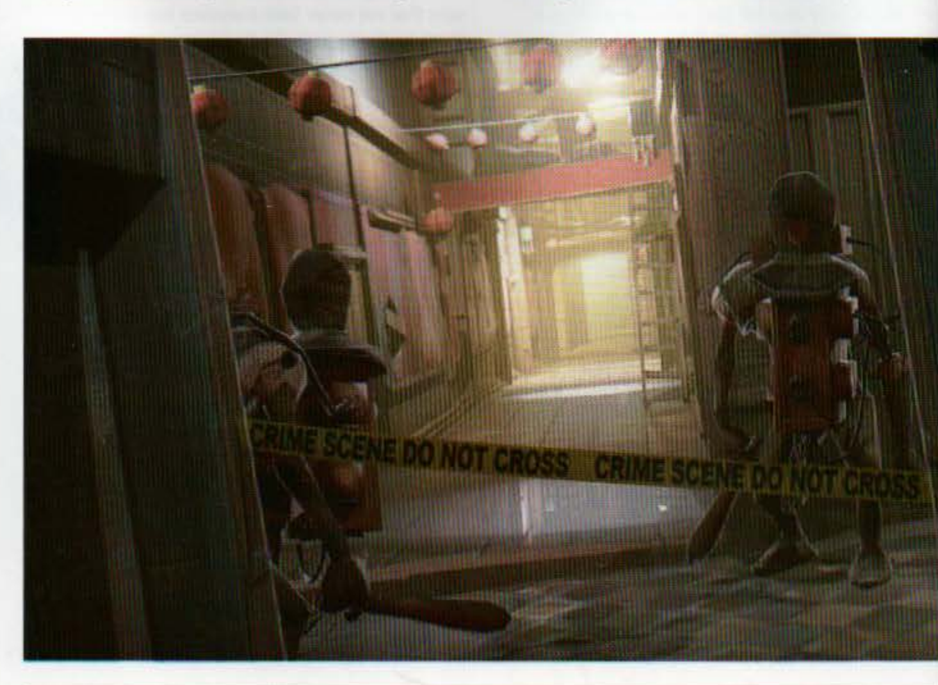
AJ: A lot. For starters, we started off as a team – hence Team Tarsier – in the GamePort incubator but early in 2006 we finally created our own independent studio. We've struggled a lot to get into the industry and break that catch-22: being new but lacking the track record to sign good publisher deals. So while refining some of o[ur] internal concepts (including *Metronome*) we've done a bunch of outsourcing work and smaller projects, both for big name franchises and small casual games. We've hired some excellent people and made some very important contacts.

Since day one we've had a really good communication with SCEE. It's very refreshing to see that they're seriously trying to bring gaming 'forward' with this new generation and it's been encouraging how they've been treating us like an[y] studio, looking at our qualities instead of having that old 'must-have-track-record' judgement.

So why has *Metronome* still not been signed?

BS: From the start, *Metronome* has been a high-risk project: a new team, pieces of unproven gameplay, a setting that doesn't fit into the marketing people's pre-defined frames, etc. It all adds up. Also, there wer[e] a couple of stupid early design decisions on our part regarding our intended audiences. But overall [I] don't think it had much impact, and we've gone a long way since then.

AJ: Right now *Metronome* needs a proper 'vertica[l]



Newswire



Virtual meatballs

Sweden has announced plans to open an embassy and information centre in the online world *Second Life* – the first country to do so.

Although not strictly a diplomatic mission to improve trade or fend off a Sweden/*Second Life* war – the idea comes from an informational body called the Swedish Institute – it has the full backing of the Swedish foreign ministry.

The embassy, called the House Of Sweden and based on the Swedish Embassy building in Washington, will not issue passports or visas but will provide details on obtaining these documents in the real world, as well as information for tourists hoping to visit the country.

"It will have answers to questions on all aspects of Sweden," Olle Wastberg, general director of the Swedish Institute, said. "*Second Life* allows us to inform people about Sweden and broaden the opportunity for contact with Sweden easily and cheaply."






According to its creator, *Metronome* has and always will be a console-oriented project. Its sound recording mechanic is said to have stemmed from conversations about interactive audio and analogue control sticks

slice' of the game to represent all the updated designs. The problem is that right now it's not something we can afford to work on with a full team, full time. Otherwise it would already have been done. For a bigger player than us, however, – someone who's not at the bottom of the games industry food chain – the costs would be very small. Given the overwhelmingly positive response from gamers and the press everywhere, this should be, if not a solid investment, then at least a very sound gamble.

In earlier interviews you were unable to summarise the game in a single sentence. Was this a problem when pitching to publishers?
BS: Initially with *Metronome* we were more or less working with two different 'one sentence' versions: one internal without any commercial, Hollywood punch to help the dev team feel the essence of the game and one for initial publishing and marketing contacts. When talking to gamers I feel that the typical one-sentence summaries can be a bit demeaning: 'Hello look at me look at me swosh bang'. The players who are interested in a game like *Metronome* are clever enough to not be fooled by that stuff any more.




Tarsier's vision for *Metronome* seems so complete you'd think the game, its sequel and the inevitable art book existed already. As Sunesson explains: "The whole *Metronome* universe was set up as *the* place to allow as cool a game experience as possible without breaking internal logic or having stupid plot devices

The online press seems determined to name a platform for *Metronome*, usually PS3. Does this make life difficult?
BS: It makes me feel a little bad when someone says they went out and bought this or that console to play *Metronome*. It may also have induced some publisher confusion, but in the end that's actually turned into more and better contacts for us.
AJ: I still haven't figured out how the hell the game ended up on online store listings, with expected release-date and faked box-art and all. It's been pretty crazy, but all in all I think it shows how there's a craving among gamers for a game that doesn't just fit in to a defined formula.

It's hard to look at, or even name-check *Metronome* without thinking of Dark City and The City Of Lost Children. Would you rather these comparisons weren't made?
BS: As long as it's being compared to good stuff it's all cool; The City Of Lost Children is a goddamn masterpiece in my opinion. Of course comparisons come with all kinds of baggage, adding external stuff that's nothing at all like *Metronome*. But there's just so much of the city that's yet to be revealed that people can only work with what they've seen so far.

Finally, do you have a message for those *Metronome* fans who worry that the game might never be released, or instead be released in a bastardised form?
BS: I'm pretty sure that once we get a game out there that takes place in the city of Metronome, it's going to be all kinds of awesome, no matter what form it takes. So, err… just hang in there, ok? Without all the support and interest shown for *Metronome* we'd very likely have given up a long time ago. As long as we know there are still *Metronome* fans out there, we know that we are doing something right and will keep working to make it happen.



OUT THERE



JUMPSTART FOR 360 EMUS?

It was launched as a home for independent coding and original ideas, but Microsoft's XNA Game Studio Express development tool has produced the Xbox 360's first indie emulator: Lone Coder's XNA SharpNES.

A port of SharpNES for Windows by Jonathan Turner, the 360 version is in its very earliest days and currently runs at 60 to 70 per cent speed without sound or save states.

Meanwhile, over on Sourceforge.net, a *Space Invaders* arcade emulation project called DotRetro announced that its upcoming version 0.3 would also tackle NES games in .NET and XNA for running on the 360.

Neither of these can be used on the 360 without an XNA Creator's Club membership, and are currently not particularly user-friendly, but show what XNA can do in the hands of determined coders.

- http://code.google.com/p/xnasharpnes/
  http://sourceforge.net/projects/dotretro







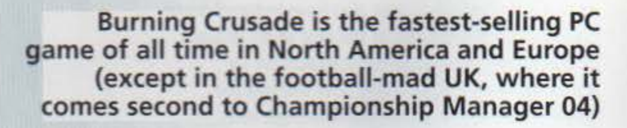
Cosplayers may be the public face of the *WOW* fan – encouraged by an offer of special treatment when it came to collector's editions – but they came in all shapes and sizes to the launch, with families, schoolboys and teams of Chinese gamers all there

SOFTWARE

Burning love

World Of WarCraft's expansion breaks PC sales records and humbles console launches; millions rejoice

If there were any doubt that Blizzard's fantasy MMO *World Of WarCraft* had changed the face of gaming in the last two years, that doubt was laid to rest on Tuesday January 16, with the launch of its first expansion pack, *The Burning Crusade*. According to Blizzard's estimates, *Burning Crusade* sold 2.4 million copies worldwide in its first 24 hours. This makes the expansion the fastest-selling PC game of all time in North America and Europe (though not, it must be noted, in the football-mad UK, where it comes second to *Championship Manager 04*). To put those first-day figures in perspective, last year's fastest-selling game on any format – Microsoft and Epic's 360 shooter, *Gears Of War* – took ten weeks to reach the three million mark.

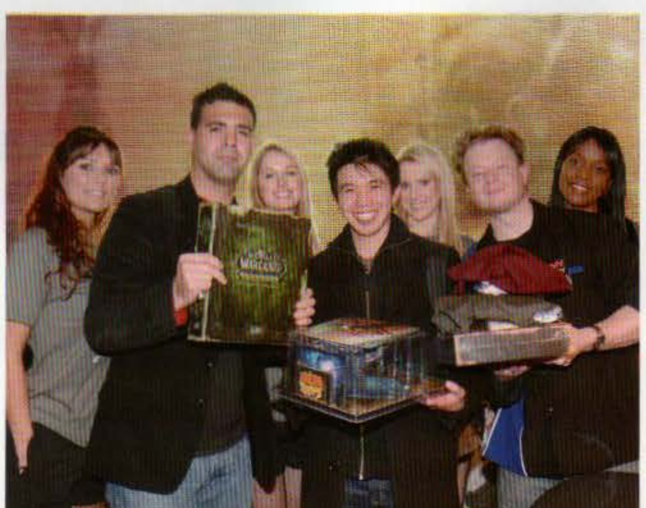


Burning Crusade is the fastest-selling PC game of all time in North America and Europe (except in the football-mad UK, where it comes second to Championship Manager 04)

Those 2.4 million are just the advance party of Blizzard's crusade, too. Days earlier, the developer had announced that *WOW* had surpassed an astonishing eight million active players worldwide. Of these, two million are in North America and 1.5 million in Europe, suggesting that the majority of western players' hunger for new content was such that they weren't prepared to wait a week. However, another 3.5 million are in China, where, along with Korea, the expansion has yet to launch.

In our interview with him last month, Valve's Gabe Newell half-joked that if Blizzard declared *WOW* a platform in its own right, it would be considered far more successful than Xbox 360 or PS3. Anecdotal evidence from *Crusade's* midnight launch in London, at HMV in Oxford Street, proved him right. Though it gathered late, the throng ran comfortably into four figures; queues covered every available inch of the store's vast ground floor and stretched around the block outside. Attendance was thought to be considerably higher than for the store's Wii launch event in December, and certainly eclipsed the Xbox 360's launch just down the street at Game in late 2005. HMV considered it to be its biggest entertainment launch ever, bigger than any music or film release.



















Arguably, the real launch crowds for *The Burning Crusade* weren't at HMV in London (top) or any of the other midnight store launches around the world. Hundreds gathered on *WOW's* multitude of servers (right) to witness the opening of the Dark Portal to the new continent of Outland, even though few of them could actually step through it

There was less razzmatazz than you would expect (and get) at a midnight release of the latest console hardware: no lightshows, no celebrity appearances, just a couple of Blizzard staff doing a signing, a gaggle of booth babes (modestly covered up in *WOW* T-shirts) and some sideshow demonstrations of the licensed trading card game. Some fans added to the sense of occasion by turning up in costume, in true BlizzCon style, or proudly brandishing gamespeak in-jokes written on placards.

The homespun, hobbyist-convention feel of fandom reclaiming the streets was appropriate for a game whose success is built on community.



Blizzard VP Itzik Ben Bassat was willing to sign copies and discuss the future. The company will make another MMO, but wants to explore other aspects of online gaming first, and he dropped heavy hints that *StarCraft* would be the next franchise renewed

It also matched well with the increasing sense that the PC plays host to gaming's silent majority, a vast userbase that loiters just outside the glare of the console manufacturers' marketing spotlights. As well as pushing massively multiplayer gaming to a new prominence, *WOW's* tremendous success is giving those players a standard to rally around.

And rally they did, even those who once despaired of Blizzard's game. "This is the biggest concentration of nerds I've ever seen in one room," said one customer, Neil from London. "It's good stuff, it's empowering." Neil was attending with his friend and erstwhile *EverQuest* guild master Nikolai, a Dane; both are MMO veterans of some vintage who had originally eschewed *WOW* for *EverQuest 2*. With the launch of *Burning Crusade*, they were finally ready to embrace Blizzard's popularisation of their beloved genre. "You think, oh what a load of cartoony shit, it's really gimped... and then you kind of think, well why the hell not, it's a game. I don't really want to be spending seven hours getting my corpse back any more. I've got to go to work tomorrow."

"It certainly has the casual crowd behind it," agreed Nikolai, "and I should get over it because that's what you need. Eight million. I mean, that's more people than live in Denmark," he added, shaking his head.

Neil and Nikolai were the exceptions, though. The majority of people in the queue were seasoned *WOW* players, but had never touched an MMO before it. Few would define themselves as console gamers for anything more than "blowing off steam". Kenny, from South Africa, had arrived from offline gaming via *WarCraft III*, while Mark, an American, was a *Counter-Strike* and *Quake* player who, like so many others, fell into Azeroth by accident: "Someone gave me this *WOW* account and I was like, hmm, ok, whatever. I've been playing it for two years now."

Many seemed quite surprised to find themselves at a midnight launch. "I've been looking forward to it to a degree," prevaricated Kirk from Idaho; he was mostly there, he said, to get ahead of the pack on upgrading his account, fearing that Blizzard's servers would fall over the next day.

It's no surprise that *WOW's* constituency is primarily men in their 20s and 30s; there were plenty of tired expressions and crumpled business suits on show. But there were also sizeable contingents of cool young urbanites, of women and the middle-aged; none of them exactly new demographics to gaming, but many new to the peculiar spectacle of a midnight launch, and to this level of commitment to their pastime.

When they got home, installed the expansion, fought their way through the account upgrade and finally logged on, they would find a world even more welcoming, more dramatic, more generously rewarding than it had been before. Their excitement was justified, and so is Blizzard's phenomenal success. The only question remains, if *World Of WarCraft* is indeed a platform to itself, who can possibly provide its rival?



"My honest opinion is that it's pretty much a disaster. They keep saying that they have a free service. Well, if they don't have anything, of course it's free. And you know what: what's free about $600?"
Microsoft's Chris Satchell doesn't let decorum stand in the way of venom as he critiques PS3's online service

Tyra: "He left you to go play the game while you were in labour? That... Dr Garry... That..."
Dr Garry: "I think that's pretty intense. How do you..."
Tyra: "That's the biggest thing in the world. Somebody having your, your woman having your baby and leaving for a videogame, that's very intense to me."
Things get, well, intense in a Tyra Banks talk show about the perils of *World Of WarCraft* addiction

"Wii could be considered an impulse buy more than anything else."
Sony spokesman Dave Karraker aims for dismissive, but hits something rather closer to despairing

"Deeply flawed but necessary to the festival's survival."
Slamdance director Peter Baxter describes his decision to pull *Super Columbine Massacre RPG* from the event's Gamemaker competition, following pressure from financial backers

"Future archaeologists will be able to identify a 'Vista Upgrade Layer' when they go through our landfill sites."
Siân Berry, Green Party female principal speaker, shakes an ecological fist at those junking their old machines for the sake of a new OS. Here's hoping no one shows her *Crysis*

"All of those bunk games sit on our shelves. If we do end up selling them, we lose more money, due to the lack of price protection. They won't let us return the bombs. So if we buy a bad title, we are stuck on an industry-induced money losing ride through the land of price drops. Of course, if the videogame industry produced quality games, we wouldn't have this issue."
An open letter from online retailer DVD Empire explaining why it's dropping out of selling videogames





INTERVIEW

Love and rockets

If you thought Geometry Wars rather than PGR3 was Bizarre Creation's lasting contribution to 360, prepare for fireworks

Boom Boom Rocket has more to live up to than most casual games. Not only is it the follow up to Bizarre Creations' landmark *Geometry Wars*, it's also EA's first foray into Xbox Live Arcade. A firework-detonating rhythm music game, it's destined to be seen as the spiritual successor to PS2 launch title *Fantavision*, but as **Ben Ward**, Bizarre's community and web lead (above) revealed, the team has its own ideas.

What kind of team have you got working on *Boom Boom Rocket*?
We have seven core members, with others across the company helping out. The majority of the team is actually made up of our shared-tech audio team. Some of them have prior experience in graphics coding, but we've also brought in two dedicated graphical coders to give things a bit of extra punch. One of these guys is Stephen Cakebread, the author of *Geometry Wars*, so you can tell we're taking *Boom Boom Rocket* very seriously indeed.

"We were approached by EA, and it sounded a great idea so we jumped on it. Having a new IP with a really fun gameplay idea behind it is what Live Arcade is all about"

How is your approach different to that of developing a game like *PGR3*?
Having smaller concepts means that the coders and artists we use are more rounded in their skill-set. In a large game team we are forced to have very specialist roles; user interface coder for example. On XBLA there usually isn't room for such specialisation – everybody pitches in. In terms of gameplay, there are many differences between XBLA and a full retail title. The audience is completely different. People are expecting something which they can start up and almost instantly be having fun. This is a concept which runs entirely through the game, from the splash screens, to the UI, to the game itself and then to the end of round summary screens. Speed and fun are paramount.

With the success of *Geometry Wars*, it must have been tempting to go straight for the sequel – why have you opted to make something new instead?
There's a lot of risk in making another *Geometry Wars* game. The first XBLA version was so delicately balanced that even adding a single new bad guy could drastically change the game. We're perfectly happy to take our time and get any sequel absolutely spot on; rushing *GW3* isn't an option for us.

Could you tell us a little about EA's involvement, seeing as this is its first XBLA game? Is this an area it has big plans for?
We were approached by EA with the concept, and it sounded a great idea so we jumped on it. Having a new IP with a really fun gameplay idea behind it is what Live Arcade is all about in my opinion. We fleshed out the design here at Bizarre, but our designers have been working very closely with EA's Pogo Studio to ensure that the game is consistent with their initial vision. EA have more Live Arcade titles in development, but *Boom Boom Rocket* will be their first foray onto the platform. We're really







BIZARRE CREATIONS

In addition to the singleplayer game, same-screen multiplayer battles will be offered, with the music increasing in tempo every time a track is cleared and repeated





Boom Boom Rocket players will be asked to trigger their fireworks in time to the music while travelling through the cityscape, with good timing rewarded by a more spectacular display of explosions. The question of whether or not the soundtrack will contain the 'ooohs' and aaaaahs' of a typical firework display remained unanswered at the time of going to press

happy that Bizarre can be a part of that, and we think we're delivering a game which a lot of people will be surprised with.

What was behind the decision to use a classical soundtrack?

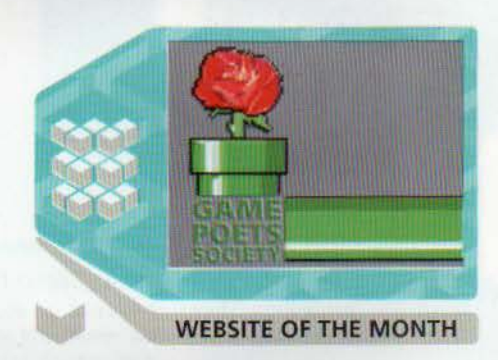
It isn't straight classical. It's actually been remixed by Ian Livingstone, so that it mirrors some of today's contemporary music but with a recognisable beat. Classical music was picked for a couple of reasons. The first is that it's fairly neutral in its appeal: you don't alienate anybody with your soundtrack. The second reason is that players tend to understand the beats and choruses of classical music easier than some modern pop. Classical stuff tends to have a set structure, a set beat, and is easier to choreograph music to.

There's been a drought of top quality XBLA titles recently – are there common pitfalls for people making arcade titles?

Well our stance is very much one of 'quality over quantity'. We're not the kind of company to throw out a million games per year. We'd much rather take our time and put out one or two quality games every year or two. That's what people have come to expect from Bizarre Creations, and we're sticking to it with our XBLA titles.

Does it annoy you that some people make the equation that because XBLA titles and casual games are smaller, they must therefore be easier to make?

Well they're not necessarily 'easier' to make, but certainly in terms of organising a huge team and working to a tight schedule it's easier to put together and Live Arcade title. With Geometry Wars we had one dedicated programmer. In terms of sheer manpower, *Boom Boom* is an order of magnitude above that. Is this an indication of future Live Arcade titles? At this stage, who can tell? In comparison, we have a core team of more than 45 working on *The Club* at the moment, with literally hundreds of shared tech and outsourcers working externally. So XBLA still has quite a way to go before it equals a full retail title.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

There are a fair few game fans who have fallen prey to the lure of the easy haiku – indeed, Edge's forum has hosted its share over the years. But the Game Poets Society shows a bit more dedication to the cause, crafting earnest sonnets and indulgent free form paeans to *Metroid*, *Jet Set Radio* and *Diablo*. A cut above the half-hearted work of forum amateurs – although unlikely to be troubling professionals any time soon – these poets have a decent sense of form and a very likeable slyness in their approach. From the archness of The Best Videogame Poem Ever Written to the knowing flair of the *Counter-Strike*-inspired W1ls7 I 4l0n3 d1d C4ll up0n 7hy 41d, there are some gems here, and a credible promise of more.

Site:
Game Poets Society
URL:
www.gamepoetssociety.com





EVENT







Another unexpected scheduling change has been the announcement of an extra business day for the Tokyo Game Show, possibly inspired by the overpopulation of its show floors during last year's consumer event. Unlike the Leipzig GC (above), TGS doesn't section its venue into business and public areas

Show-time showdown

E for All means trouble for some as expo season takes shape

Some eight months after the demise of E3, the changes being wrought on the expo continue to cause instability in the games industry calendar, this month causing the cancellation of the Gen Con So Cal show, a companion to the four-day Gen Con convention in Indianapolis. Though the quantity of videogame-related content at the event, which primarily incorporates tabletop gaming and pen-and-paper RPGs, had still to be announced at the time of the cancellation, blame was attributed to reduced support from key exhibitors and competition from other shows in the southern California area – including E3 replacement E For All.

An auspicious move to the LA Convention Center for Gen Con So Cal (the plan being to attract heightened interest from the videogame sector) seems to have backfired, with the recently unveiled E For All eyeing the same venue for the period October 18 to 20. Gen Con 2007, however, remains scheduled for August 16 to 19.

Looking east, the organisers of the increasingly popular Leipzig Games Convention announced a partnership with the Conference and Exhibition Management Services group in Singapore to create Games Convention Asia, to roughly inherit GC's schedule of business and consumer days – the latter also incorporating competitions and organised tournaments. Alongside local government agencies, support for the plans has also come from western companies including Microsoft, 10tacle and Nokia.

Finally, the operators of web comic Penny Arcade issued a traditionally self-assured statement to announce 2007's PAX: 'The fastest-growing and largest gamer festival in North America.' Up to 200,000 square feet of floorspace is being anticipated at the Washington State Trade and Convention Center, the event running from August 24 to 26. The online behemoth's 'conservative' expectations for attendance now stand at 30,000.

Continue

Live Arcade
Bigger files, more games: finally things get moving

65nm
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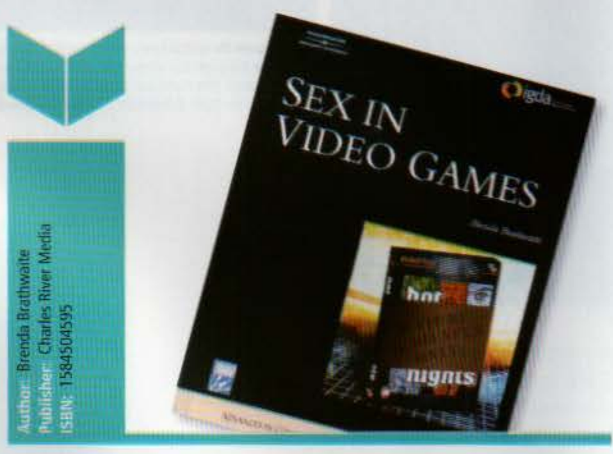
Episodic content
Don't let Relic's wobbles turn a new trend into a sin

Quit

Patent trolls
Greedy, ugly and destined to waste everyone's time

'Value' packs
Bundling reaches new highs – and lows – with PS3

Burger King
Sales up 41 per cent? The Sneak must be stopped



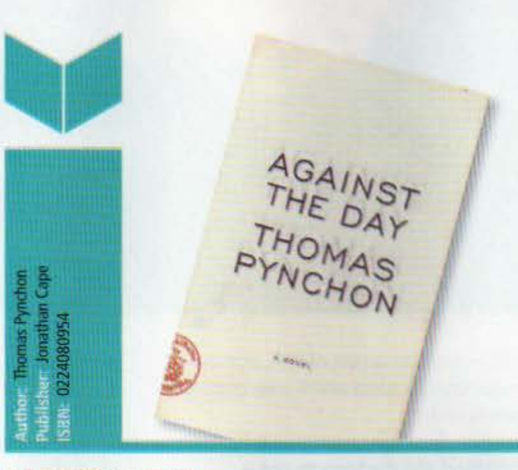
Author: Brenda Brathwaite
Publisher: Charles River Media
ISBN: 1584504595

SEX IN VIDEO GAMES

Academic and designer Brenda Brathwaite reveals the threats and opportunities of mature games

Considering it's a fundamental urge, the lack of sexual motivation (let alone action), in games has long been considered an example of their immaturity. Ironically though, the assumed kiddie nature of the audience, plus the difficulty of employing interactivity in a sophisticated manner, seem to be the reasons why. But combine the two outside the boundaries of the regulatory framework, as in the case of Hot Coffee, and you can see how explosive, and expensive, getting it wrong can be. No wonder most developers steer well clear. Sex might sell in theory but with the US retailers refusing to stock adults-only content, it's not an option for mainstream publishers who rely on sales.

The book doesn't get too prescriptive over the whys and wherefores of the situation. Instead, it takes more of an encyclopedic approach – covering the history of games such as *Custer's Revenge* and *Leisure Suit Larry* through to more recent experiments such as *Singles*. There's also plenty of legislative detail concerning Hot Coffee, various standards bodies and the increasingly tough US attitude arising over game ratings, as well a technical exposition on obscenity laws. It's a shame there's not more discussion about the growing libidinousness found in online games such as *Second Life*, as well as more niche products such as *Sociolotron* and *Red Light Center*, let alone the design processes in *Playboy: The Mansion*, for which Brathwaite was the designer.



Author: Thomas Pynchon
Publisher: Jonathan Cape
ISBN: 0224080954

AGAINST THE DAY

Cult author Pynchon twists a fin de siècle backdrop into a meandering ensemble piece

If nothing else, the sheer bulk of Against The Day warns the uncommitted reader. Almost 1,100 pages long, Thomas Pynchon's sixth proper novel is also his most disconcerting. The wild disconnects that characterised Gravity's Rainbow or the contemporary political polemic of Vineland are replaced by the more gentle step-by-step progressions of dozens of characters who are picking their way through the scientific and social upheavals of the late 19th century, while all the time World War I looms.

Of course, our vision throughout is also obscured by the interplay of layers of magical realism, perverse metaphysics and Victorian spiritualism, despite the fact that Pynchon builds his stories around historical events. The Chicago World's Fair, Nikola Tesla's experiments, the rise of American monopolists, the Tunguska Event in Siberia and machinations in the Balkans feature in some form, while the characters themselves fall in and out of love, lust, plant dynamite, fly airships, take drugs, discuss vectors and quaterions, and seek revenge on their father's killers, one of whom has married their sister. There's always plenty going on as the action slips between characters and continents, but there's so little grit or angle, Against The Day feels surprisingly lightweight. And despite the enjoyable nature of Pynchon's style of writing and his enormous erudition, there are too few instances when even the committed reader feels interested in what's going on. Shorter and more intense would have been better.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

The Crossing
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** VALVE



'Crossplayer' is the name of the gametype in Arkane's FPS, both heroes and villains in its story mode available for player control. *HL2* artist Viktor Antonov provides the anarchic Parisian backdrop

Silent Hunter 4: Wolves Of The Pacific
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



Hardcore becomes Hollywood in Ubisoft Romania's sequel to the meticulous *SH3*, optional arcade settings and streamlined crew management bringing a greater sense of fluidity to its seas

Nanostray 2
FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** TBA



Out with the touchscreen weapon changing of the original and in with a basic high score display and info box. Shin'en has been listening to the fans, it seems, keeping the action pure and simple

Driver '76
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



Sumo and Reflections' conversion of *Parallel Lines* outruns Atari's debtors and crashes into Ubisoft's stable. No era jumps this time, just 27 new missions to keep those '70s streets unclean

QuickSpot
FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** BANDAI NAMCO



Bandai Namco's DS foray moves from block party (this month's *Trion Cube*) to a simple game of spot the difference. Boss battles and a Brain Activity scoring system are the conspicuous details

Medal Of Honor Vanguard
FORMAT: PS2, Wii **PUBLISHER:** EA



As *Airborne* makes its next-gen push, another last-gen exclusive brings up the rear. Unlike *Burnout Dominator*, however, *Vanguard* is also headed to Wii, a wobbly game of point and shoot expected

Hour Of Victory
FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** MIDWAY



Tenuously described as 'a new WWII experience for Xbox 360,' Midway's UE3-powered FPS promises objectives suited to more than just routine infantry assault. Suspension of disbelief, perha

White Gold
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** TBA

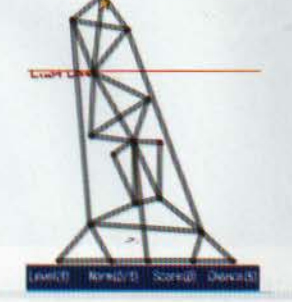


The latest postcards from *Boiling Point*'s sequel make an ideal what-happens-next competition. Can the car negotiate the blad of grass without a flying jaguar knocking it into outer space?

Crazy Taxi: Fare Wars
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



Everything but the sun and sea appears to have taken a texture hit in this portable joyride. Arcade and Dreamcast maps from th first two games feature, but will the snappy framerate follow?



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH
Stick Remover

http://ishi.blog2.fc2.com/blog-entry-206.html

It's a sign of a maturing genre – in this case the physics toy – when the differentiation between different examples of it become more and more finely drawn. Where last year's darling *Tower Of Goo* (www.experimentalgameplay.com) was a breath of experimental fresh air, this refinement – you take struts away, rather than adding them – has the air of a new gaming form finding its feet, albeit it with trademark wobbles, lists, crumples and collapses.

Made by the creator of the enduringly captivating *Sand Sand*, and the enduringly unsettling *War Of The Hell*, *Stick Remover* sets the simple challenge of maintaining the structural integrity of a tower as you delete one spar at a time. The physics are rewarding – entertainingly unpredictable while remaining entirely plausible – but the basics are also well judged. It's up to you to call a halt to each level, manually progressing to the next when you feel you've done as much as you dare. It's a neat mechanic, handing you total control of the risk/reward balance, and ensuring repeated returns.



The future is Live

Famitsu's Koji Aizawa on how Japan has embraced playing online

The arrival of the new generation of home videogame consoles in Japan has meant the real start of the online gaming experience for most gamers.

The Xbox Live service introduced with the first Xbox rapidly became a huge success, mainly because it was well designed and had appealing features. Microsoft's vision did a lot for the online gaming in Japan, and even pushed companies like Konami into adding online play support to their games, such as *Winning Eleven*. And online gaming is today expanding even further. Microsoft's Live Anywhere and Zune will come to Japan (even if the music player's release date has not been made official yet) and in combination with Windows Vista I think there is much to be excited about. Well, Zune does not come with a web browser, but most of the broadband users have a PC so it is not such a big problem after all.

There was a great deal of excitement around the PS3 at its launch, but disappointing sales and the weakness of its game line-up mean that the platform appears to be struggling for now. Its supposedly big online aspect wasn't very clear until it came onto the market. After E3 and TGS, it was as if the PS3 online services would be the same as Xbox 360's – but this may be only the way it appears. There are of course similar features, like friends lists or the ability to play against other gamers.

The Xbox Live service introduced with the first Xbox rapidly became a huge success, and Microsoft's vision did a lot for the online gaming in Japan – even pushing companies like Konami into adding online play support to their games

One major difference between the two systems is that Microsoft is in full control of Live, and online support for titles has not been withdrawn. The PS3 online architecture sees publishers taking charge of online play, and so it is possible that services for some titles could be withdrawn if the PS3 online arena does not prove popular.

It is also true that the PS3 offers a lot of variety in terms of its downloadable content: HD video that's not necessarily all videogame related, demos, etc. Downloadable games are also available for the PSP and the PS3. There are also few popular games which are free, like *Mainichi Issyo*. This is based on the very popular *Dokodemo Issyo* series, and peopl interact with the extremely cute characters of the game on a daily basis. It is even possible to design the room of the hero and personalise it to the user taste. New items are made available for a very low price so people can continue to improve their interior design and have fun with their character. The interface is not perfect and there is still plenty o room for improvement, but the potential looks very promising for the future. In that sense, we are awaiting the coming updates with interest.

And what about the Wii? It is not putting forward any breakthrough technologies, but instea is using the current tech to deliver an entirely new gaming experience. That is very like Nintendo. On top of the Virtual Console which gives access to a



Nintendo and Sony have both relied on cuteness to ease newcomers into the online experience in Japan. The Wii's Mii software (above) is highly expressive, and Sony is relying on an interactive version of its old, and much-loved, cat mascot, Toro (far left)

The big three's online services – the Wii weather channel (top), the PS3 store (middle) and Xbox Live (bottom) – each represent a very different philosophy. Nintendo aims for simplicity of use, Sony for freedom of function and Microsoft for seamlessness of service

large library of older games and the Mii characters, the Wii is very carefully designed so elders and kids won't need any computers to communicate or send e-mails to friends or relatives. It is really using today's technologies for unprecedented simplicity, accessibility and fun, and its internet browser is also very accessible. The Wii is today not just about its controller but the very unique online experience it provides as well.

Talking about online services, it's time for a shameless plug: my parent company Enterbrain is also entering the arena. Efigo is a social network service for the PC (http://efigo.jp/). The name is an amalgam of Enterbrain, Famitsu, internet and game – and it is basically similar to MySpace or the Japanese Mixi. But we want ours to be a very useful tool for online gamers as well. Of course it is exclusively designed for the Japanese market, meaning it is all in Japanese, but already lots of game creators and people from the industry have signed up. It shows how quickly the online landscape is changing here, now that the new hardware has arrived.

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

White Knight Story



The arrival of a translated *Rogue Galaxy* (see next issue for the full review), serves only to reignite our enthusiasm for Level 5's epic role-playing PS3 blockbuster
PS3, SCEI

Shadowrun



A taster of multiplayer at X06 confirmed *Shadowrun* has enough new ideas to shrug off its low-key E3 debut. More a case of Death Anywhere than Live Anywhere
360/PC, MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS

Spore



It's still hard to believe that it's really real – or at least on its way to being really real – but a DS version is an impossibly tempting prospect. Let there be Lite, indeed
DS/PC, EA

Coke and twinkies

Gaming's unhealthy future diet



In *World Of WarCraft*, as in many MMORPGs, those who allow their weaker characters to be 'twinked' with better items or more money by more established characters are frowned on

Dave Perry, interviewed on p68, raises an interesting proposition. What if in-game advertising, rather than relying on billboards and loading screens, let its sponsors reach into your playing experience? What if one day, as you scoured *World Of WarCraft*'s auction houses, clicking time and demoralised time again on that epic sword you can't afford, a notice popped up. 'Hi there. Noticed that you're keen on that sword, but that you don't have the money for it. Good news! Coca-Cola would like to buy it for you as a gift. How about it?'

Now, there's no suggestion that Blizzard (or indeed Coca-Cola) would ever consider such a thing, nor that Perry would consider Azeroth a particularly suitable home for a such a sponsorship deal, but the idea remains, as does the burning question it provokes: would you say yes?

The most common response – thanks to an office straw-poll – is a barrage of questions about whether or not the sword would be branded (it wouldn't) or if other players would be able to tell (they wouldn't), followed by a shame-faced yes. The complexity of that emotional response – the worries about peer opinions, the sense of guilt, the concern over such cosmetics – shows the complexity of the relationship between people and virtual items, and how rudimentary our understanding of that relationship still is.

It's the same problem which underpins the hostile reaction to the new trend of 360 Marketplace purchases (new content, cheat codes, etc – see p8). We respond with an instinctive morality, but just why is it more meaningful to upgrade a handful of stats by killing ten-dozen identical monsters, just to sell their hides for virtual cash and buy a picture of a sword, than it is to let Coke do it for you? Is doing the Coke deal better or worse than buying the item via the services of a gold farmer? Just what should the relationship be between time-rich players and cash-rich players, or between purists and enthusiasts?

What's clear is that we're still only at the beginning of a process that has that peculiar prickliness only found where money and time intersect so exactly. And, perhaps sooner than we think, we're all going to need to have our answer ready for whether or not we'll let Coke twink us.









FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **BANDAI NAMCO/ELECTRONIC ARTS/HANBITSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **FLAGSHIP STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SUMMER 2007**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E150, E164**

Hellgate: London

Some think it's a shooter, some think it's an MMO, but does Flagship even know what its spiritual successor to Diablo is yet?



The game's interface is, unfortunately, typically ugly for an RPG with sci-fi overtones. It's bearably restrained during the action (thanks to the focus on ten hotkeys and two mouse clicks), but bringing up menus involves inevitable crashing sheets of metal









The game will take you from Bloomsbury and Covent Garden to Piccadilly, and then heads east towards Monument, St Paul's cathedral and the Tower of London. Future expansions and content updates will continue to explore the capital and will perhaps go beyond it into rural England, while new cities will be reserved for full sequels

Perception can be a minefield. Flagship's pitch for *Hellgate: London* looked so simple and irresistible on paper: a randomised action-RPG crossed with a firstperson shooter, featuring a near-future demonic invasion of London, from the makers of the smash hit *Diablo* (Flagship was formed by the founders of Blizzard North). With almost every conceivable PC gaming button pushed, a publishing deal with Bandai Namco quickly materialised; distribution and marketing deals with Electronic Arts and HanbitSoft, for west and east respectively, soon followed; and the search for licensing and franchising opportunities got underway. Global domination seemed assured.

But, complains community manager **Ivan Kresimir Sulic**, "it's kind of hard for us to present *Hellgate* because it may look like a shooter at first, it has some of the flash of a shooter, but then when you really look at it you're like: 'the lighting's not as good as *FEAR*, the environments aren't as articulated as *Doom*, the action's not as good as *Far Cry*'. You never hear people talking about how the quest mechanics are on a par with *Neverwinter*, how it looks better than another action RPG, 'boy, isn't it considerate that you can move the camera around, unlike *Titan Quest* or *Diablo*.'"

And now Flagship finds itself fighting confused perceptions on another, almost diametrically opposed front. As plans for





Hellgate's online multiplayer solidified, a wave of panicked alarm swept across the gaming community, rumouring that the game had lurched from one (perceived) end of the spectrum to the other and become a full-fledged MMO. In truth, it was never going to be either a persistent online world or a visually cutting-edge offline action game, and it never will be. But, with development three-and-a-half years old and release a supposed six months away, the exact form it will take remains a little vague.

Hellgate has taken only baby steps from the Diablo template towards the MMO world. It remains a dungeon-crawl with randomly generated monsters and locations

Hellgate has taken only baby steps from the *Diablo* template towards the MMO world. It remains a dungeon-crawl with randomly generated monsters, locations and loot, biased towards fast, broad-brushstroke action. The entire 40-hour campaign will be playable either solo or in multiplayer, online or offline. With its combination of private, instanced adventuring and player-populated 'towns' (actually Tube stations) that act as lobbies and quest hubs, it has edged into the same territory as *Guild Wars*. But, crucially, all content will scale to the level of the player and the size of the party, and all character classes are basically offensive, meaning that the focus on social grouping and party dynamics that put ArenaNet's game just the other side of the MMO line is largely absent.



What has muddled people's perceptions most – and won't be cleared up just yet – is





Customisation options for the armour and 100 weapon types are extensive. Weapons will alter visually as well as in their properties when you attach a scope or extra magazine; although the same isn't true of armour, you will be able to harmonise your wardrobe across the 100 different colour schemes





Landmarks – like the early appearance of Covent Garden market here – appear in so-called 'semi-randomised' environments to ensure that their context is appropriate

the yet-to-be-finalised financial model that Flagship and its publishing partners will adopt. "The biggest thing we want to do over *Diablo* is create ongoing content," says Sulic. "To that end we have to find some way to justify that [financially]. There's got to be either real money transactions, something to do with auctions, there's got to be micro-purchases or mini-expansions, or some type of fee. It's not that we haven't announced it, it's that we literally haven't decided." The only things that are definite is that the strategies will be different in different markets, and that there will definitely be some form of free multiplayer option out of the box. The overall plan is to turn *Hellgate* into an inexhaustible money-pit for Flagship, and an inexhaustible content-pit for fans, easing the frustrations of *Diablo* for both sides. The Hellgate universe will also be bolstered with comics, novels, figurines and collectibles, perhaps even anime.

Still, for such vital strategic thinking to be muddy so shortly before release is worrying, and it's one of several crucial areas where the game's identity seems in crisis. Control is currently WASD and mouse, but some at Flagship are still advocating an option to return to *Diablo*'s click-only interface. The headline firstperson viewpoint is currently undermined by a compulsory thirdperson camera for melee combat because the firstperson melee animations are "total shit" (bear in mind one of the three factions, the Templars, is strongly melee-focused). Many will choose to play in thirdperson anyway, the better to admire *Hellgate*'s extraordinary steampunk armour designs, and



The engine is said to scale across a huge range, from super low-end for "rural China or wherever" to a bells-and-whistles DX10 version with HDR lighting, dynamic shadows, motion blur, depth of field and parallax mapping

comprehensive options for customising characters' looks; no bad thing, but a differentiator lost.

Sulic also confesses: "We haven't figured out exactly what we're going to do with our classes" – all that's known for sure is that they will be subdivisions of three character factions that broadly equate to melee warrior, ranged attacker and spellcaster, and almost all will be able to command pets or summons. Nonetheless, a true sense of the skill specialisation options remains a gaping hole in the *Hellgate* proposition for RPG fans.

Hands-on, *Hellgate* is frantic and moreish: "We want to go for that *Serious Sam*-like gameplay," says Sulic – and it's easy to see that such a fast-paced, hair-trigger RPG, with such an unusual setting and such deep customisation, will distinguish itself easily in the online fray. Whether it will translate as well as Flagship hopes to low-end systems and massmarket tastes is another matter. It seems likely that the gloomy, Gothic visuals will turn to depressingly drab post-apocalyptic brown on lesser PCs, and this could deal it a critical blow in the broadening market for online RPGs. It's also questionable whether a randomised game, with so little scope for scripting and set-piece, will slake the thirst for epic drama and spectacle inspired by the setting.

With Blizzard dropping the *StarCraft* name more often than *Diablo*'s these days, it looks like *Hellgate: London* has a clear run in a neglected sub-genre. But before its success can be assured, Flagship has a lot to do, and even more to decide.



Class roster

Sulic defines *Hellgate*'s three character factions in a brilliant fusillade of nouns. "The righteous religious zealot fanatic Templar Knight, he's your classic warrior fighter paladin barbarian character, the melee tank. Then we have the Hunter, which is the militaristic alien colonial marine predator crack squad unit or Sam Fisher-like character, he's all about big guns and a lot of swearwords. And then we have the Caballist – your summoner demonologist transformer mutant freak kind of character, a spellcaster basically." Most classes of all three factions will be able to control subordinate AI units: the Templar Knights have the most powerful squires; the Caballists' summons have the greatest scope for skill improvement; while Hunters' robotic drones can be equipped from your own inventory. The number of pets will keep party sizes down to five to ten.

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY**
DEVELOPER: **MIDWAY STUDIOS AUSTIN**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

BlackSite: Area 51

The latest entrant to Midway's scorching hot summer: a B-movie sequel with A-grade ideas

Big on secrecy, not so much on surprise, Midway's *Area 51* did have one genuine twist in its tale: it wasn't nearly as bad as it should have been. Billed as 'the only action-packed firstperson shooter set in the US government's most secret and secure military facility,' its saving graces were tough to advertise: consistently high production values, genuine senses of camaraderie and threat, and trust in the timeless appeal of firepower over substance. *BlackSite*, a major league sequel no less obvious in setup, is just as deceptive when it comes to outlook and technical ambition.

"I was really struggling with finding some interesting angles," admits creative director **Harvey Smith**. "I kept thinking about the older sci-fi tropes, thinking that none of it was particularly relevant. Aliens hidden among us sprang from fears of communists hidden in US society during the '50s. That seems like it would be relevant today, due to our fears of terrorism, but it's not: the modern concept of the terrorist is anchored in a particular, recognisable type of person or a specific culture. So we had to revisit some of the basic elements while also trying to stay true to *Area 51*."

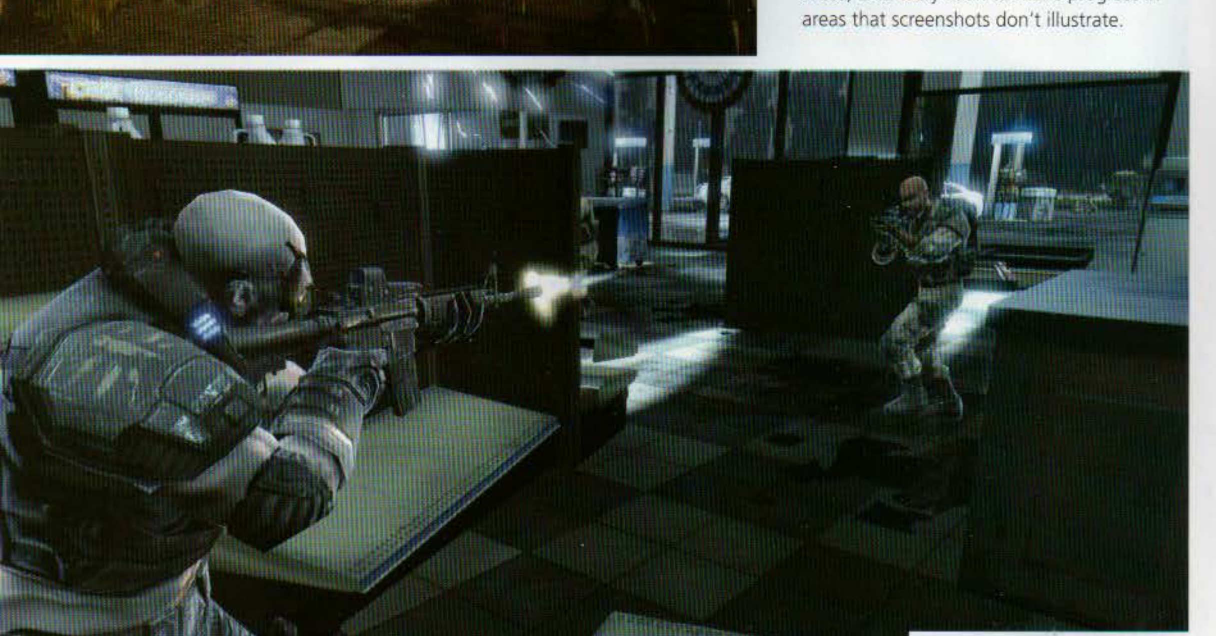
Again, the veil of secrecy hangs thick around *BlackSite*'s story, though the gist appears to be that while the first game made an unholy mess of its alien/human hybrid experiments, obliterating its venue in the process, the sequel's cleaning up. First stop: the surrounding province of Rachel, Nevada, a deserted dustbowl where man-made hell has literally broken loose. In design terms, The Reborn seems anything but an alien infestation, splicing into its DNA the usual suspects of Aliens and Starship Troopers. But while Smith's happy to admit that *BlackSite* will apply its polish in broad strokes – audio, framerate, interface and art direction are all mentioned – his Austin studio, home to several fragments of the shattered Looking Glass, is suitably keen to make progress in areas that screenshots don't illustrate.



"You've got to pick a few areas to go deep," notes Smith. "And you've got to come up with a fiction that you love – that actually inspires your passions as a game designer. I want to make *BlackSite* a solid shooter, but we're also driving towards interesting new gameplay angles: new enemy behaviours and other mechanics that make the environment dynamic and tactically interesting."

Assuming that both silver screen and past shooters inspire *BlackSite*'s events as they do its looks, there'll be plenty of familiarity to support its innovations. Expect a variety of both open and cluttered urban battles furnished with toybox physics objects and debris courtesy of *Stranglehold*'s Massive D technology, later descending into the close quarters of the Reborn nest and potentially the wreckage of Area 51 itself. This, insists Smith, is a thinking person's bug hunt, tapping into today's fresh climate of fear and paranoia from political, social and military angles. You have to be sceptical: in a squad-based, co-op enabled shooter, after all, where do you find time for topical debate?

"Of course, the dialogue relates to that subject and those themes. But the fundamental setup is also related, involving where the enemies come from and what the conflict centres around. I've worked with game designer Ricardo Bare for years, since *Deus Ex*. He and I are collaborating with Susan O'Connor [whose recent credits



Despite an 'ethnically diverse' human cast, *BlackSite*'s bald space marine credentials seem impeccable. Vocally, on the other hand, the absence of *Area 51* star David Duchovny should at least ensure a degree of tonal diversity



An early sign of the unpredictable enemy behaviour *BlackSite* hopes to provide. Clever arrangements of waypoints, spawn points and physics-enabled furniture should trigger explosive competitions between its AI



Part two

"Oh my God! We've been talking about it for years and years," declares Smith of *BlackSite*'s co-op mode, which interestingly divides responsibilities between squad command and another undisclosed ability. "The 'co-op dungeon party' idea was around long before it actually happened. At Origin, before my friend Starr Long started what became *Ultima Online*, we used to joke about two spin-offs: *Multima* and *Adultima* - you can make your own guesses about the nature of each. On almost every project I've worked on, we've talked about co-op; it's obviously something with the potential to make a game more fun, but it's weird how much attention it's getting right now. We're definitely including two player co-op modes for *BlackSite*, but not because it's a buzz word."

include *Gears Of War* and *Bioshock*] on *BlackSite*'s story."

Another of *Area 51*'s unlikely disclosures was a reminder that fear – something beyond mere jump scares and gore – is a rare FPS commodity. By exposing the anxieties of otherwise functional characters, it built the sense that, for all its familiarity, something was *wrong* with its situation, environment, and ultimately its hero. Taking the idea beyond mere subtitled dialogue and transitional cutscenes, *BlackSite* wants this to play a crucial role in both its storyline and action. Morale, we're told, will stongly affect your effectiveness as squad commander, with invisible attributes such as shot accuracy and reaction time dependent on it, potentially complicating the one-touch command system. Given these fluctuating variables, where does Austin draw its line between AI autonomy and player direction?



The stockpile of fallen masonry and signage brings *Half-Life 2* to mind, the news of vehicle combat sections *Gears Of War*. *BlackSite* has a few tricks up its sleeve, and it'll need them to shake off such glaringly obvious comparisons

"We've tried to set up a system where the player can just ignore the squad, for the most part. We want it to be as easy to use as a pistol. It's fun to play with – fast paced"

"If I had a dollar for each time we've wrestled with that I could fund my own games," says Smith. "We've tried to set up a system where the player can just ignore the squad, for the most part. Autonomy and fluidity, based on smart AI, was an important point. We want the squad to be as easy to use as a pistol, and we've worked out some general-purpose rules that work unless the player overrides. It's fun to play with – fast paced."

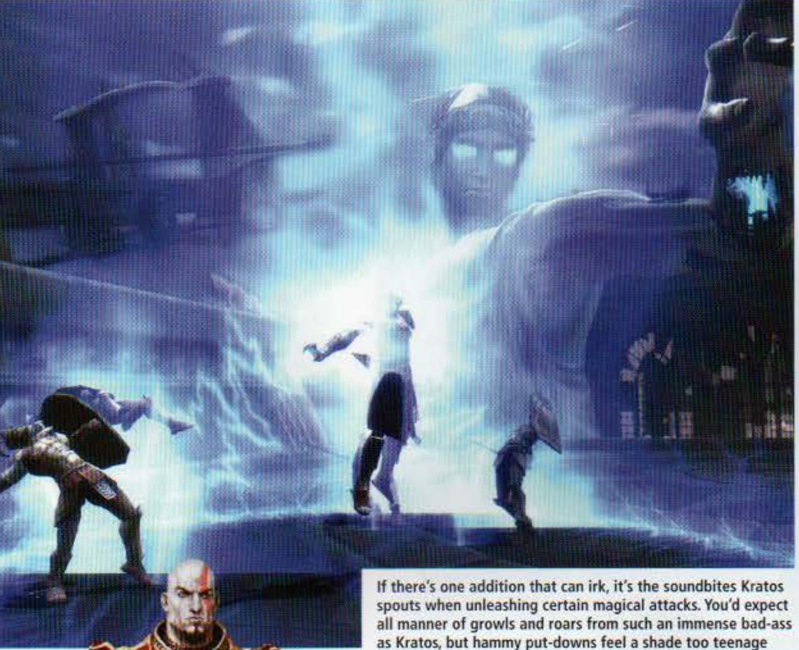
Whatever remains hidden in *BlackSite*'s files, the most pertinent details – its ambitions – are already clear. Like *Stranglehold*, it wants to uphold the prime virtues of the gun game in spite of its modern ideals. No secret agenda, then, just a difficult one.



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (SANTA MONICA)**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MARCH (US), TBC (UK)**

God Of War 2

A promising deuce for Zeus' enfant terrible, affirming the wisdom of bringing Sony's own Gaias of war back to PS2's masses



If there's one addition that can irk, it's the soundbites Kratos spouts when unleashing certain magical attacks. You'd expect all manner of growls and roars from such an immense bad-ass as Kratos, but hammy put-downs feel a shade too teenage





Make no mistake: *God Of War*'s success didn't lie in reinventing the action game, but in rejuvenating its very heart. A minimal-nonsense attitude, widescreen snarl and a brewery of testosterone saw it jabbing its claim straight into the origin of a genre that's often too content to oscillate between combo obsession and switchblade timings, and sci-fi militarism both slick and sludgy. A cross between Greek mythology and Jurassic Park, it allowed its visitors to get closer to familiar ancient beasts than ever before – and then touch them, albeit with a chain-blade to the eye – only ever dilly-dallying with some sticky environmental puzzles. There's no need for evolution in such a feral specimen, just momentum, and *God Of War 2* seems to have it, even to the point of beginning almost at the point where we saw Kratos, the most hormonal and jilted of Mount Olympus' tenants, last.

Once more forsaken by the gods – who are angered by his relentless destruction above and beyond his job description – Kratos joins his army in the final stages of the toppling of Rhodes. Zapped back down to mortal size and stripped of much of his power by the magic of goddess and former ally Athena, the battle for Rhodes simply becomes a backdrop for a typically blockbuster clash between Kratos and the city's Colossus, jolted into being by Athena's power (see 'Shatter of the Colossus'). And so begins Kratos' defiant expedition to change his miserable fate in an opening stage that bears all the hallmarks expected in the wake of the original.

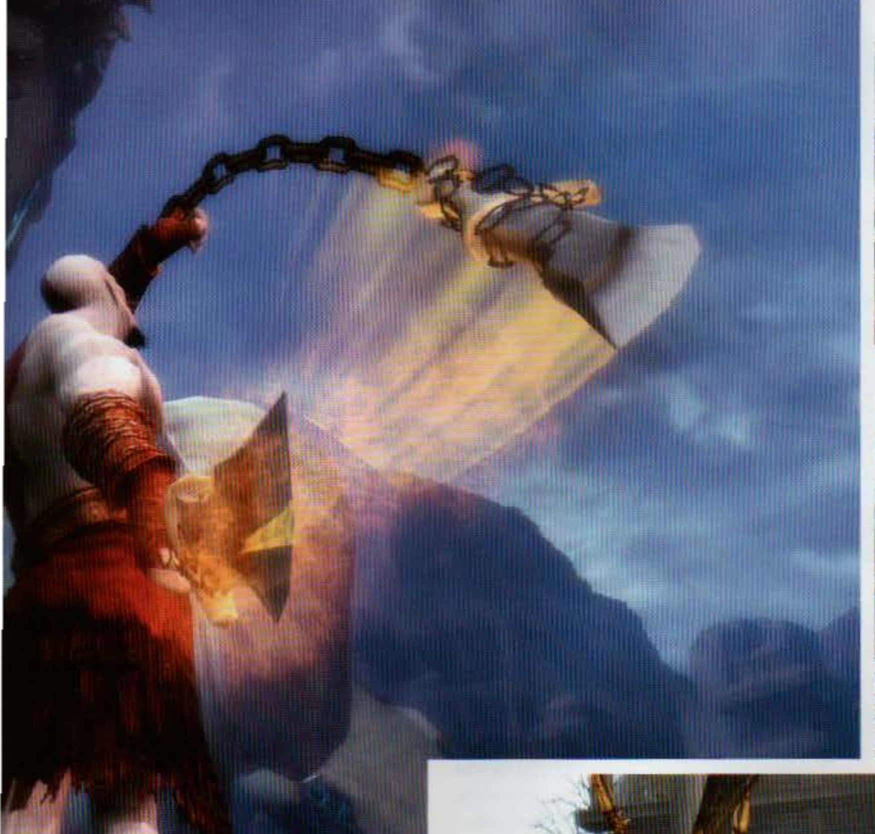
But, even in his diminished state, and much like Jack Carver at the outset of *Far Cry Instincts: Predator*, Kratos' skill-set is already somewhat bulging. Most notable are his special attacks, dazzlingly furious chain-blade combos performed by pressing L1 in conjunction with any attack button, once again leaving no doubt as to where the game's action affections lie: in sheer spectacle, rather than subtlety, the combo count spiralling out by the dozen with each button press. But even in this opening stage, that old weariness regarding environmental manipulation – context commands, button mashing and block-booting – also rears its head somewhat, showing how heavily the studio still has faith in such minigame procedures but also cautioning that *GOW2* will have to work harder to make the player feel the same. And those crucial moments of calm haven't strayed, framing some epic and panoramic views during moments of relative downtime as Kratos travels toward and through the kind of locations that many games fear to tread outside of cutscenes.

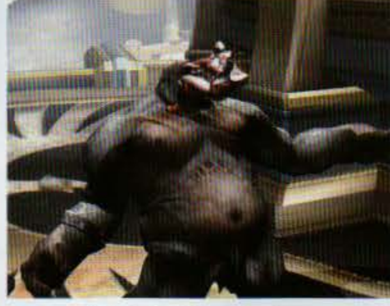
Whatever takes place, it's very much determined to restate the original's visual strength and firstparty punch via a world



The past year has seen the PS2's headstone marked with all manner of fresh glories before it settles down to a senility of licensed dregs aimed at younger gamers

Given the mythology, and the proximity of the two games, it should be no surprise to see familiar enemies returning with an injection of sequel steroids – the Minotaur and Cerberus, for example, along with Medusa's corpulent sister and Cyclops enemies that can be mounted by smaller foes







The Challenge of the Gods – a staged series of battles with demanding requirements – will return, again offering some unlockable content but thankfully including save points between each round and more forgiving conditions for progression this time



featuring some of the most convincingly solid and least clinical of prerendered, auto-camera worlds. Aerial battles with griffons starring amputated wings as casualties; the appearance of the classic Golden Fleece and other abiding relics; fighting the barbarian king that slew him as a warmongering human; an attitude and engine energetic enough to turn gods into game objects; perhaps its mission statement was never to make the player say 'to hell with the PS3 version,' but *GOW 2* – prospective annoying puzzles allowing – seems more than capable of flogging an increased gallop out of the old warhorse. The past year has seen the PS2's headstone marked with all manner of fresh glories, its last rites offered by titles like *Okami* and *FFXII* before it settles down to a senility of licensed dregs aimed at younger gamers, but *GOW 2* potentially represents yet another final chance for it to push its watermarks just that little bit higher.

It doesn't feel like progression, however. Despite the battle arena mode (where custom clumps of enemies can be battled) and the opportunity for Kratos to go flying, it feels fixed on-track to rekindle the glam 'n' gore that made the original stand out regardless of the lack of any true originality about its workings. It's exactly what's expected from a sequel, but given the bullnecked clout of its bollocks, that's exactly what is wanted.





Shatter of the Colossus

God Of War proved its reluctance to pussyfoot from its outset, featuring an opening stage that barely caught enough breath to gasp out tutorial prompts as Kratos battled a hydra across the deck of a ship. *GOW2* revisits that template of turning a training stage into a bombastic, multi-segment boss fight, with Kratos under attack from the Colossus of Rhodes, its arms and shimmering eyes tracking him across the city. The first face-off proper ends with Kratos firing a ballista at the monstrous statue before, of course, loading himself into it and shooting his way into some intimate QTE GBH. Later, he jams its arms into giant mechanical wheels, using the opportunity to leave the Colossus with facial scars and leaving players in no doubt of exactly where the game intends to take them.



Along with the return of Kratos' signature weapon, a barbarian hammer will also be available, taken from a resurrected king who killed him as a mortal. The Blade of Olympus could well reprise the butchery of Artemis' sword, and a trident is also mooted to appear



Icon is HUD-less by default, much like *FN:R3*, but there's also the option to switch it on, revealing a single energ bar that says much of the game's dynamic. There's littl ceremony to either victory o defeat in the current build

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (EA CHICAGO)**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBC**

Def Jam: Icon

A battle for territory becomes a fight for identity as EA's most bizarre fight game changes track

If there's a battle underway in *Def Jam: Icon*, it's ideas rather than egos that are at stake. Developed by a Chicago studio lauded for mapping hi-res flesh on to *Fight Night*'s awkwardly animated bones, *Icon* is anything but the game fans will be expecting. In its present form, which we're told is 60 per cent complete, there's little to suggest that Aki Corp's frequently splendid predecessors have left any kind of a legacy. There's no pantomime exuberance to the game's (absurd) action, and no readiness to embrace rap's comic potential or genuine, oft-forgotten personality. The doors of self-deprecation have slammed shut, making this as inaccessible to R&B outsiders as you'd always feared the series could be.

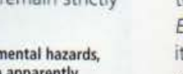
In theory, though, *Icon*'s still fresh and exciting enough to allow slivers of hope. Chicago's insight, which in *Fight Night*'s case was enough to nigh-on monopolise all thought of videogame boxing, has stretched as far as to make this a hip-hop brawler about rhythm, if not expression. *When* you perform moves is key; what those moves are is not, each fight becoming more a contest of backing tracks than mixed martial art techniques. Each fighter, be it Ludacris, Ice T or another vaudeville villain, has their own licensed anthem to take into battle, the beats of which can power up a well-timed strike. Scratching (a mid-air gesture that can also swap an opponent's track with yours) sets off environmental hazards that can ignite, punt or otherwise upset anyone stood nearby.

It's a difficult change of tack to convey in a genre notoriously averse to change, and Chicago has yet to attempt the feat itself. There's no tutorial in *Icon* as yet, build notes even stressing that mechanics remain strictly work-in-progress. As interesting as the game's direction is, it's also quite conceivable that it's got everything backwards. A synaesthesic brawler in which the music adopts the rhythm of the fight (rather than vice-versa, as it is here) sounds like a great idea, but sadly it's hard to imagine a licensed juggernaut such as *Icon* having the luxury to try it out. This is shaping up to be as close to *EA Trax The Videogame* as you can get, and it'd be interesting to know which agencies are pulling which of its strings.

Moreover, it doesn't even look as spritely as its beat-matching conceit suggests. Despite environments – garage, rooftop, TV studio, nightclub – that literally jump to the rhythm by every means possible (and often impossible), *Icon* is currently a sterile venue for some rather lethargic combat. Bleached, banal and still to be optimised, it's tough to connect with, even if you do buy into its story of ghetto-hewn thugs with vaporous virtues, groping for the bloated teat of America's record industry.







Each of the levels features several environmental hazards, the rooftop's including a helicopter with an apparently blind pilot and a handy pool of periodically electrified water





The Build A Label story mode is a po-faced affair, kicking off with a drive-by shooting before turning back time to explain how this rather routine scenario came to pass

Kudo reactor

It's rare that high-profile preview code emerges in such early form, and even rarer that EA should give magazines freedom to pull screenshots from it. The urge to showcase the bug in which every character develops grey hair was as strong as it sounds. But, enthuses EA Chicago head Kudo Tsunoda: "Much has been improved since the preview build. First of all, the entire Build A Label mode is not complete with all its record label mechanics and unlockables. We've also added individual fighting styles and ratings to each of the fighters: each now has a unique style that's tuned to the beats of their music. If somebody throws you on a hazard and tries to use DJ Controls to add a beat, you also have the ability to scratch faster than your opponent to increase your recovery speed."



The sketch artistry of Aki's Create mode has been replaced with one of EA's usual house style, packed with sliders and crisp textures







In another *Dominator* departure, a largely fresh line-up of muscle cars, sports coupes and modified civilian vehicles can be unlocked by completing specific race objectives – filling a drift quota within a set time period, for example





Attempts to pinball traffic will meet a sticky end in *Dominator*, the authority of slow-moving vehicles over the racing line bringing the series back to its pre-EA roots. Road rage takedown events, however, still feature



Burnout: Dominator

To the inevitable delight of series traditionalists, an unexpected fork in the road splits battle racing in two

FORMAT: **PS2, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EA GUILDFORD (CRITERION)**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MARCH**

The cross-platform superstars of EA's portfolio can thank Sony for their new-found identity crises. With the company essentially holding two current-gen home platforms in PS2 and PS3, the practice of multiformat development has a gulf of technology to overcome, and little excuse to do things the good old-fashioned lazy way.

For *Burnout*, this means two sequels to last year's *Burnout Revenge*, one headed straight for uncharted free-roaming territory, the other – this game – enjoying a winding tour of series history. *Dominator*'s looks might suggest a mere refit, but in truth it's a much bolder venture than either *Legends*' greatest hits anthology or the pile-up of different mechanics you'd otherwise expect.

By throwing out many recent changes, notably traffic checking and Crash mode, *Dominator* is catering to a distinct clique of *Burnout* fans thrown off by the series' controversial twists and turns.

Opposing racers can still be taken out on any of the game's new circuits, which flash through otherwise familiar urban corridors, beneath glittering forest canopies, along breezy waterside boulevards and into the jumbled guts of industrial facilities. But of the Burnout and the Takedown, it's the former that seems to dominate here.

Ending its post-*Point Of Impact* hiatus, the *Burnout* gauge once again defines the experience as it exists on PS2. As you wash back and forth across its roads in endless, sideswiping drifts, the challenge reverts to being one of mettle rather than rage, *Dominator* reinstating the role of traffic cars as obstacles to be feared. Only by draining your entire *Burnout* gauge with pedal down, eyes locked to the horizon and nose begging to bleed, can you score the multiplier bonus that fills it straight back up again. Everything, some will say, is as it should be.

That other fly in the cross-platform ointment, the PSP, is also in line for *Dominator* action. Rest assured, though, that the game is scaling down to its handheld version rather than up from it. Ad-hoc play accommodates up to six players, while online leaderboards apply to all events

Possibly to enforce this traditional racing tenet upon those unfamiliar with pre-EA *Burnout*, a new mode – Maniac – imposes a time limit upon proceedings that can only be increased through reckless play. Fans of *MotorStorm* will also recognise the new Signature Shortcuts feature, by which the usual blind alleys and dirt tracks must first be unlocked using a well-aimed takedown.

Criterion certainly has a knack for turning the blasphemous into the brilliant, but only a true maniac would suggest that its open world *Burnout* (see 'Blowout') couldn't possibly go off course. *Dominator*, at least, should make a great safety car.

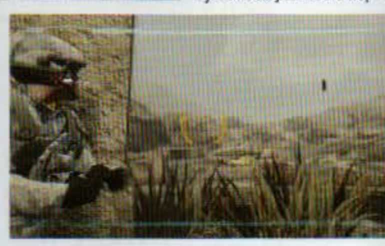


Blowout

Sure to acquire a subtitle with more teenage kick than a mere 'S', *Burnout*'s other sequel, which leads on PS3 but heads also to 360, is still an unknown quantity. Its world appears sterile next to *Dominator*'s, but that could simply be a case of post-production effects still to be applied. Seamless and diverse, its map encompasses all of the traditional environments.



Although the close-up animations can still be a little clunky, the full-body repertoire of dives, rolls and lunges feel as desperate and dynamic as you would hope



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (PARIS/RED STORM)**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE/USA**
RELEASE: **SPRING**

Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2

The future has never felt so close, as Ubisoft fast-forwards its sequel machine

Yes, it's less than a year since the arrival of Clancy's advanced warfighters – blessed in the meantime, let it not be forgotten, with a brace of rather unexpected BAFTAs. With a rapacity once reserved for *Prince Of Persia* fans, it seems that Ubisoft has turned its attention to those who warmed to the first *GRAW*'s glow of Mexican heat-hazes and thermal night-sights. So has 12 months bought us the first real second-generation 360 title?

At first sight, not an enormous amount has changed. This isn't so much a case of a game betraying its parentage as a case of mistaken identity. All the strengths of the series' fast-paced, team-focused dynamics, honed over three games (and their expansions) are in place, as is the luxurious visual style of the first *Advanced Warfighter*. But not having to worry about a major engine or game mechanic overhaul has left the teams clear to focus on refinements.

Some of the improvements are those that you'd hope for from any sequel: respawn points are much closer together, for example, taking the pain out of untimely deaths, and AI has evolved for both your squad-mates and opponents, meaning the new willingness of each to think for themselves and use cover satisfyingly cancel each other out. Then there are the headline new features, destined for the back of the box, like the ability to gain full top-down views of the battlefield via the controllable drone, and the introduction of a medic class.

But perhaps more significant are the slipperier elements. Both music and ambient sound are strikingly well-produced: the former dynamically underscoring the heat of battle, the latter creating a soundtrack of its own through the creaking of your armour and muted echoes of birdsong. Pacing also seems much improved, as *GRAW*'s appetite for explosive set-pieces is threaded more steadily through the action. The result, aided by the enhanced visual design, is a real sense of the cinematic, as battles evolve just within believable boundaries – mortars, helicopters, crashes and ambushes fleshing out the basic pattern of duck, shoot, advance. The danger with a yearly cycle is the risk of a tired, rushed botch-job. But the promise, as *GRAW 2* seems to stand a good chance of showing, is that it can be just long enough to hone the good into the excellent.



The picture-in-picture hook of the earliest *GRAW* videos remains a hallmark, both for the striking live-action footage used for the cutscenes, and in the new ability to zoom full-screen to any teammates' perspective

Rainbow tricks

The popularity of *GRAW*'s multiplayer appears to have triggered something of a rethink for the sequel's singleplayer, which now seems to have the emphasis on individual action that used to be the hallmark of *Rainbow Six*. The same seems true of *GRAW 2*'s multiplayer, which looks faster and more brutal than some of the more methodical *Ghost Recon* veterans may be expecting. The new medic class may well prove to be an essential addition.



Controlling the MULE can be done either in thirdperson, where you can direct it like an eager gun-dog, or in full-screen firstperson, as is the case with the top-down aerial drone





The visual refinements over the original *GRAW* are subtle but significant, adding greatly to the sense of atmosphere with a shifting heat-haze and air laden with fine desert dust





Frame-by-frame analyses are available to make those split-second input windows easier to identify, the game's HUD defiantly retaining its arcade stick prompts. The Dojo's grittier than *VF4 Evo*'s training clinic, though its faceless sparring partner does return



Virtua Fighter 5

Less exclusive than it was before, Sega's fight club opens early for bouts of domestic violence

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (AM2)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (PS3) (US, JAPAN), MARCH (UK) SEPTEMBER (360)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E162**

Even before it threw the suggestion of PlayStation exclusivity back in Sony's face, *VF5* had an unusually aggressive stance. Here, for perhaps the first time since the early days of *Street Fighter II*, one fighting game had the chance to become *the* fighting game, the next Iron Fist Tournament still little more than a tease, Itagaki's girls fast becoming more dead than alive. For the series more hardcore than those who'd think to call themselves hardcore, there'd never been a less dangerous time to go popular.

Yet *VF5*'s home version, coming first to PS3 and later to 360, has sense. It appreciates that the largest audience it could hope for would still be just a drop in the ocean, and that by chasing a floating audience of casual button-mashers it'd lose more than it would gain. Based on the Revision B board of the blossoming arcade version, its differences exist purely outside of the game's tightly-balanced bouts. Sidestep attacks, newcomers Eileen and El Blaze, and other character-specific tweaks (most notably the transformation of recent entrant Brad Burns into an even more convincing bad-ass), remain the biggest strides it's made since *VF4 Final Tuned*.

Soundly bitten by the IC card bug, *VF5* has developed an intimidating array of customisation options since its last preview, a near-final build confirming that prestige has become a strong in-game economy. Quest Mode, fundamentally identical to the virtual arcade tour of *Evolution*, holds a considerable reserve of trophy items to decorate a player's HUD, available through Item Battles or as purchases from the in-game shop. Likewise, the four base outfits of each character can be decorated with costume items, again intended as a reflection of skill.

The characters themselves, now totalling 17, are predictably almost identical to their arcade counterparts. Whatever temptations there must have been to tweak the shaders behind their sometimes rubbery, sometimes waxen skin have been suspended for the sake of authenticity. A wise move considering how, in spite of its modern foibles, *VF5* is still far and away the most attractive fighting game ever made. With backdrops and character models finally worthy of its animation, it's wasting none of the opportunity previously described.

In a move sure to draw flak from those unacquainted with its concrete framerate, however, neither PS3 nor 360 versions will feature online competition. In this build, at least, there is VFTV, but as AM2 confirmed back in **E**162 its focus is exhibition rather than direct connectivity. It has match replays and online leaderboards, but VFTV is a fairly standard portal yet to live up to its name. You can take this refusal to even approach online multiplayer until it's immaculately efficient as proof of *VF*'s integrity. Given the logistics of network contention and existing infrastructure, that policy almost guarantees *VF*'s offline exclusivity for the foreseeable future.





Confidence remains high that El Blaze, the newcomer proficient in gravity-defying Lucha Libre wrestling, will settle effortlessly into the *VF* roster. Like monkey-style kung-fu expert Eileen, he fills a colourful fighting niche



The pressing need to ensure arcade perfection, at least in terms of framerate, has given the PS3 game specs in line with its source. The visuals stay at 720p, with realtime lighting and shadow effects, together with passing clouds, lending the game's stages an added sense of movement



Malpractice

Owners of *VF4* and its companion arcade sticks may want to hold off on trade-ins for *VF5*, the latest impression of its revised Dojo mode suggesting several missing features. Characters could no longer be set to repeat specific moves over and over, making explicit scenario training difficult outside of competitive play. It's an inconceivable omission, at odds with the otherwise encyclopaedic nature of *VF5*'s training system and, fingers crossed, more than likely to be addressed prior to its arrival at retail. Also, with achievements in the familiar Command Mode now gaining prestige points, it'd be a miserly break from *VF*'s otherwise generous demeanour.

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **RISING STAR**
DEVELOPER: **MARVELLOUS INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q1 2007**

Bubble Bobble Double Shot

Once bitten, twice shy – can Rising Star's second attempt put right what once went sadly wrong?



Multiplayer is easily the biggest draw in *Bubble Bobble Double Shot* – allowing for three-way co-operative play. It's here that the colour dynamic really comes into its own, with players having to co-ordinate their attacks for some enemies, while taking on sole responsibility for others

Bub and Bob had never looked *angry* – but they had good reason to. We've seen some horrendous box art in our time, but *Revolution's* really was quite something. Doubly unfortunate then, that this dubious quality extended beyond the packaging to an ill-advised reworking of a much loved classic. There wasn't, you could say, a dry eye in the house.

So a chance for Rising Star to redeem itself with this, and the outlook is promising. While on the receiving end of another overhaul, art and audio is in keeping with the original's spirit – at least in so far as it's happy, the music familiar and the samples recognisable – while, mercifully, the scrolling levels so crippling to *Revolution* have been abandoned in favour of each stage equalling the viewing area.

The biggest change this time is a subtle one – in the form of a new 'character' a red dinosaur, Bubu, to accompany green and blue, with each capable of belching like-coloured bubbles. While the central dynamics of the game remain unchanged (kill all by bubbling and bursting) some enemies (indicated by a coloured star) can only be killed by belching the matching colour bubble – something made possible by cycling between each colour dinosaur using the shoulder buttons.

Change for change's sake perhaps, but it adds another layer to events, with a little more forethought or panicked reaction necessary as the difficulty increases. Whether it will hold your attention through 100 levels, however, is another thing.



While the colour mechanic is welcome, there's the danger that Rising Star may have overcomplicated matters. Some enemies require you to mix bubbles to capture them, and as things get frantic clumsy, deaths are inevitable

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **RISING STAR**
DEVELOPER: **MARVELLOUS INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q1 2007**

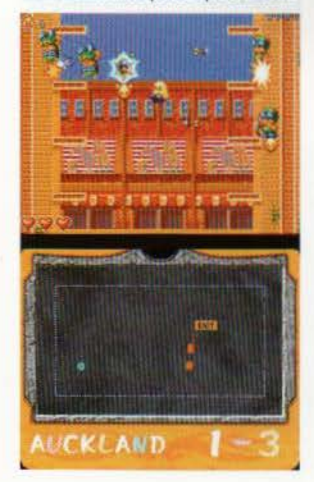
New Zealand Story Revolution

The classic tale of Kiwi meets Walrus, retold – if only to reaffirm its place as the yellowest videogame in the world

It's fair to say that *New Zealand Story* was never the most tightly designed of platformers – with enemies swarming in barely tethered chaos, and ledges placed with a scattergun approach to form. This update of the 1988 classic is very much in keeping with that – bringing with it a pleasant air of familiarity, even if levels are structured differently. The basic objective remains the same – to rescue the Kiwis imprisoned by the Walrus, first by seeking out a key hidden in the stage before finding the cage that ends the level. Much like *Bubble Bobble Double Shot*, there have been a number of small changes made. Some – like power-ups that seem to give you little (if any) advantage – are forgettable, while others, particularly when it comes to using the DS hardware, prove at the very least amusing or surprising in some small way – whether its opening a door mid-level by rotating a handle, or touchscreen balancing as Tiki attempts to navigate a tightrope.

These are all changes and additions that do little to alter the feel of the original – for better or for worse. Many of the original's failings are present, for example. Success, more often than not, still comes from riding your luck and charging through levels, as caution in the face of endlessly respawning enemies is too trying of your patience. Likewise, having kept the same visual style and background themes, it's often all too difficult to spot danger until it has inevitably killed you. Authentic? Perhaps, but how much fun that is exactly is open to debate.

One of the biggest additions is the ability to fire your arrow upward – it's so useful that it makes most power-ups redundant





Some doorways are hidden, and can only be exposed by playing spot the difference across two screens showing the same bit of action. Tap the anomaly to open the door





The DS's pair of screens are put to particularly good use during boss fights. In the one pictured above, Tiki must allow himself to be swallowed by a whale, giving him access to the beast's heart on the bottom screen

War Rock

From stop and pop to Pay and Spray: meet the new MMOFPS aiming to woo the west

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **K2 NETWORK INC.**
DEVELOPER: **DREAM EXECUTION**
ORIGIN: **SOUTH KOREA**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 22**

Behind the noisy revolution in new ways to play, a quieter but perhaps more far-reaching reinvention seems to be taking place in the form of new ways to pay. Many games are now stepping away from the 'discount the razors and make money on the blades' model, in favour of a business plan that could best be summed up as 'give away the razors and the blades, and make money on the shaving cream'.

War Rock is one such title: an MMOFPS from South Korea, it makes its money through Virtual Asset Purchase. Free to play, subscribers can then choose to buy in-game commodities such as better weapons and vehicles, or even upgrade their membership for features like voice chat.

It's a pricing structure that has served breakthrough games like Wizet's *MapleStory* well. But, as the Seagal-flavoured title suggests, western audiences may find the bulk of *War Rock*'s novelty limited to the business strategy. The game's modes, ranging from bomb disposal races to elaborate *Battlefield*-style conflicts, seem competent if unimaginative, whilst the RPG elements, such as levelling up, may be undermined by the payment system which allows players to purchase abilities as well as earn them.

As a concession to the west, *War Rock* will also be available in a boxed retail version, including sweeteners such as an exclusive weapon and in-game currency. It remains to be seen how the western market will take to a game that, while looking to the future in terms of pricing, seems firmly rooted in the past when it comes to gameplay.



Currently in open beta, a figure for the game's actual player base is hard to pin down, although a perusal of the online forums suggest it is building comfortably





The capping of graphics performance, brought in to make the game accessible to players with older machines, has resulted in a muddy-textured war, with stilted vehicle animation

Sim City DS

Japanese cities prepare for a fresh wave of UFOs and giant monsters as another PC favourite gets a DS makeover

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY (JAPAN)**

Sim City has always seemed like a good fit for the DS. And while PDA and Palm entries may have been the first to incorporate touch control, EA's new version seems likely to break entirely fresh ground by aiming the title squarely at Japan.

It's not every day that EA chooses Famitsu as the means of announcing a new game, but *Sim City DS*, a loose conversion of *Sim City 3000*, is a fresh indicator that the largest thirdparty publisher in the world is taking note of Japan's love for Nintendo's handheld. Equally, as part of the same strategy that is seeing *The Sims* transformed from a PC-shaped slice of sitcom Americana to a super-deformed doll's house for the Wii, the results seem to be finely judged to win over a notoriously picky eastern audience.

It's also clear that the developers have taken pains to make the game fit. With the 3D city displayed on the top screen, the touchscreen allows the player to lay down zones, manage electricity supply and view reports. It also plays host to the game's adviser, a manga-lite version of Will Wright.

Unsurprisingly, the game has been skewed towards shorter playing times, and although the freeform city builder remains, the core of *Sim City DS* seems to be the mission mode: a series of challenges ranging from traffic jams to UFO attacks.

Despite success in the west, the series has never really captured the Japanese imagination. Perhaps EA's new-found savvy for translation combined with the star power of the DS will change all that. If not, it's still a safe bet that *Sim City DS* will at least remain as compelling, surprising, and infuriating as ever.

未確認飛行物体 襲来

未知のパワーで都市を破壊





Wifi play is incorporated via Sister City mode, where landmarks and special buildings can be sent to other players as gifts. *Sim City* has always been a study in contrasts: urban development micromanagement on one hand, playground for rampaging apes on the other



FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **RISING STAR**
DEVELOPER: **K2**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MARCH 23**

The realtime combat makes for a refreshing, if no longer particularly surprising change, even if the simple tactic of circle-strafing is sometimes enough to avoid being hit entirely

Valhalla Knights

Does K2's roleplayer contain enough character – and characters – to get itself noticed?

Like many RPGs, *Valhalla Knights* is a game built on clichés. It sports many of the expected tropes of the genre, from the ratio of exploration to dungeon-crawling to the hero that wakes up with amnesia. Nevertheless, despite its immediate and overwhelming familiarity – even visually, while clean and quietly impressive, it could be any one of a number of fantasy roleplayers – developer K2 has ensured there is at least some individuality in amongst the expected trappings.

For starters, the combat isn't strictly turn-based, opting for a realtime system. When in combat, the R shoulder trigger locks-on to an enemy, and attacks from here on in are a simple matter of hitting the face buttons. The context of the face buttons – melee attacks, ranged weaponry, magic and so on – is changed by the D-pad, and party members (up to six) can be switched between in order to utilise special abilities and set commands.

Nothing radical there, then – certainly not for veterans of the *Tales* series – but the system works well and is still fresh enough to seem desirable. Elsewhere, your characters don't remain trapped in their initial role – sub-jobs can be taken, allowing for an admirable mix of skills and professions (so a typical fighter has the chance to employ modest magic, for instance). Also notable is the level of customisation, above and beyond the arena of professions, along with both ad-hoc co-op and adversarial multiplayer modes.

While hardly a reinvention of the handheld RPG, then, *Valhalla Knights* does at least contain some modest signs of unique character. Whether that is enough to let it stand out from the crowd is another thing entirely.



Your party can have up to six members, and management of the group is essential for later encounters. Specialising in multiple professions allows for admirably diverse skills

Coded Arms Contagion

A move away from random generation sets a predictable path for Konami's collect-em-up

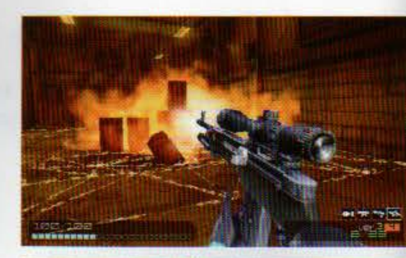
FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **CREAT**
ORIGIN: **RUSSIA**
RELEASE: **MARCH**

A game that moved primarily in circles, *Coded Arms* derived modest appeal from applying different tools to the same tasks – the essence of the item harvest genre. With Creat's Russian studio handling development of its sequel (KCEJ wrestling with PS3's underwhelming *Coded Arms Assault*) this return to military VR training programme AIDA is going round again.

Cut from Konami's usual cyberpunk cloth – all right angles, neon and metal plate – *Contagion* has managed a slight departure from the first game's aesthetic. Its maze of interiors is no longer randomly generated, and at least tries to resemble a factory environment, with gangways, pillars and walkways credibly arranged.

Despite a greater emphasis on cutscene-driven narrative, which to some degree will cross the events of *Assault*, progression in *Coded Arms* remains defined by its hardware tree more than its plotline. Like Namco's *Bounty Hounds*, enemies are just tough enough to make an incremental weapons upgrade seem attractive, happy to dodge and lunge while you jump, strafe and ponder which new gun will quicken the process most. *Coded Arms* moved quite admirably once the PSP's face buttons (again taking on either move or look duties) had broken in your thumb, and Konami seems to have settled on that as the best idea of a bad bunch. Given the state of its big brother at TGS, *Contagion*'s desire to play it safe seems wise.

Being designed rather than generated should bring change to the levels, but the sense of familiarity in *Contagion* is great

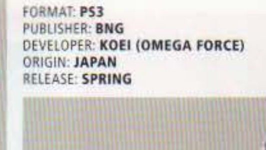






Having drawn some rather lazy comparisons with *GoldenEye* for simply having the same one-stick control handicap, *Coded Arms* has its sights set on becoming the premier PSP deathmatch game. A greater emphasis on ad-hoc wifi team play is *Contagion*'s notable change, though increased profile customisation is assured

Gundam Musou



FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **BNG**
DEVELOPER: **KOEI (OMEGA FORCE)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SPRING**

Rage against the machines, as Gundam crosses swords with Dynasty Warriors

It's a sign of the strength of the core *Dynasty Warriors* mechanic that you can change almost everything about the game only to find that you've actually changed nothing at all. Yet Koei's willingness to shed the series' traditional historical coating is a sign that the developer, at least, has concerns regarding the lasting appeal of massive body counts and ancient battles remixed as a carnival of cartwheeling corpses. In this reloading of the franchise, however, it has found in Gundam a rich backstory and an elaborate sense of history that allows it to spray the screen with metal while still providing a perfect fit for the existing structure.

So, even though it sees bulky mechs taking the place of ancient soldiers, *Gundam Musou* is still business as usual, and it's a business that's considerably more Musou than Gundam. That may prove to be something of a problem, though, as the robot series' best stories are often surprisingly sparsely populated, and the fanatical Gundam fanbase may chill at such a broadening of focus.



In fact, using the same engine developed for the PS3's *Bladestorm*, *Gundam Musou* features so much of the familiar *Dynasty Warriors* gameplay and style that even the occasional battlefield shift into outer space doesn't feel like much of an innovation. Yet, while its reliance on the existing formulae may mean *Gundam Musou* comes across as nothing more than a lavish mod, it's clear that the PS3 has found a potent lure for the Japanese market. When it reaches the west, however, where many may find the minutiae of mechs as baffling as the minutiae of Japanese history, it's unlikely to be anything other than niche in appeal.

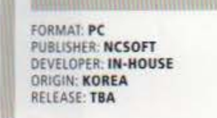




Intriguingly, Gundam was Koei's second choice of licence after initially approaching LucasArts in order to adapt the Star Wars franchise. While it's not hard to see battlefields of the same size gracing Tatooine or Endor, *Dynasty Warriors'* cavalier approach to game physics may have been harder to swallow

Aion

MMOs take to the skies as NCSoft gives gamers the power to craft more than just their character



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **NCSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **KOREA**
RELEASE: **TBA**

With *Guild Wars*, South Korea-based NCSoft has proved that its model of waiving subscriptions but charging for individual campaigns is a viable way to make money. Its latest title, *Aion*, at first appears to be a blander beast than its previous output, but beneath the conventional themes of order and chaos the game has several interesting ideas at work.

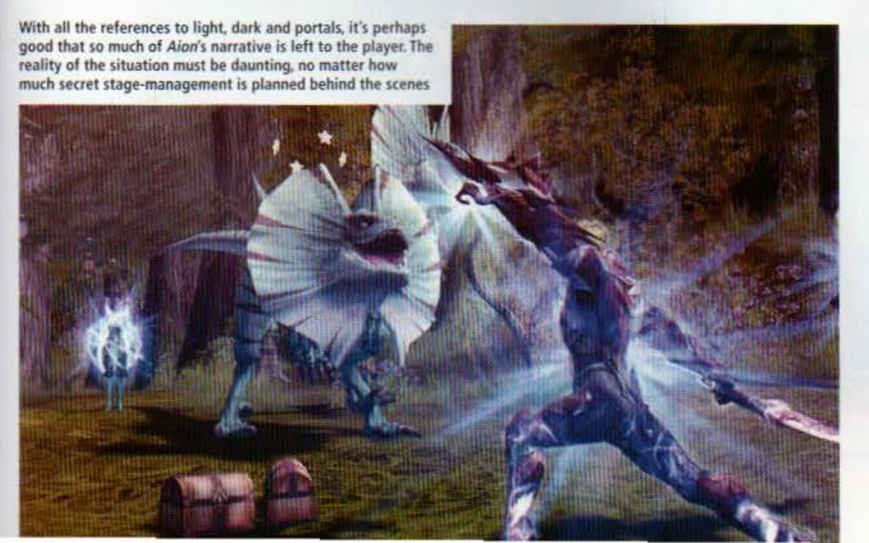
Firstly, there's the new PvPvE system, built to quietly manage the evolving conflict between the game's two playable races, and a third NPC faction. While it's not yet clear exactly how it will work, an entire race of bots is still risky when seeking to establish a community around a new title.

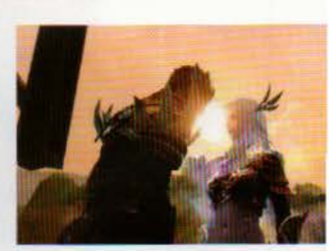
If it does click, however, the ensuing politics should make for an interesting story. And story's where another of the big ideas emerges: *Aion*'s narrative will evolve according to the actions of its players, with every subscriber able to affect the journey unfolding on their server. Ceding such influence to the community is a potential recipe for lavish disaster, or – even worse – boredom, but it's an indicator that the relative failure of *Auto Assault* hasn't dulled NCSoft's desire to innovate.

The final idea is by far the simplest in appeal: *Aion* is the MMO that will let you fly. NCSoft is promising that soaring amongst the clouds will take up as much of your time as battling, and the environments seem designed with airspace in mind.

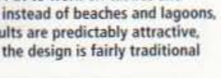
Whether the developer has the means to make gliding as fulfilling as grinding, and even if its player-driven narrative ends with a whimper rather than a bang, *Aion* is more interesting than its prettiness suggests. Although so many details remain unclear, it's good to see a company that can take the most workmanlike elements of the MMO genre and try to mount them among the stars.

With all the references to light, dark and portals, it's perhaps good that so much of *Aion*'s narrative is left to the player. The reality of the situation must be daunting, no matter how much secret stage-management is planned behind the scenes









Another surprise is that *Aion*'s visuals are a product of a licensed Crytek engine. Put to work on castles and forests instead of beaches and lagoons, the results are predictably attractive, even if the design is fairly traditional





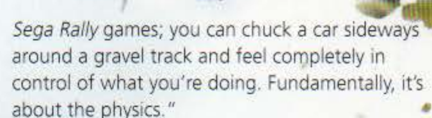
the beaten track

Solihull's Sega Racing Studio starts life by tearing the topsoil off memory lane in a mud-spattered new Sega Rally

TITLE: **SEGA RALLY**
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **SEGA RACING STUDIO**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBC**

There are two schools of thought as to where the soul of a great racing game resides. Some would argue that it's in the track, a usually inert piece of architecture that nonetheless provides a racing game's setting, storyline, level design and chief opponent all rolled into one. **Guy Wilday**, studio director of Sega's new UK-based Racing Studio, takes the opposing view.

"If you want to peg it on one thing, it's about car handling and car behaviour. The feeling of you being in control of the vehicle in whatever environment it's in is the fundamental key to any racing game working. I think that is the beauty of the original





Sega Rally games; you can chuck a car sideways around a gravel track and feel completely in control of what you're doing. Fundamentally, it's about the physics."

Unsurprising words, perhaps, from a man who during his time at Codemasters managed production of the first four *Colin McRae Rally* games, perhaps the ultimate expression of the purist, 'one man and his motor' approach. And though his current project – the arcade classic *Sega Rally* reborn for 360, PS3 and PC – is a good deal less serious, the philosophy still sticks. The original *Sega Rally Championship*'s face-off between Toyota Celica and Lancia Delta was one of videogaming's iconic duels, in which the car was very much the star.

But there's a contradiction here, because if *Sega Rally* (which will be known as *Sega Rally Revo* in the US) has a lead character, it's the track. Not the static course design, you understand, nor its setting, although the one

"In Sega Rally games you can chuck a car sideways and feel completely in control"

tropical environment shown so far has plenty of nostalgic Sega sparkle in its waterfalls, palm trees and crystal skies. It's the actual road itself: a changeable, capricious surface that, over the course of one lap, will shift from hard-packed dirt to shallow, sticky mud, from water pools to deep, wet bogs. And over the course of three laps its character will change even more dramatically. Racing Studio has concentrated most of its technological effort on surface deformation, and the cars' tyres carve deep grooves in the mud that persist the whole length of the race. Lap-to-lap, this increases both challenge and opportunity, as the road becomes treacherously bumpy, but your opponents' tyre-tracks allow you to bite down to a drier surface with more grip, in the rallycross equivalent of slipstreaming.

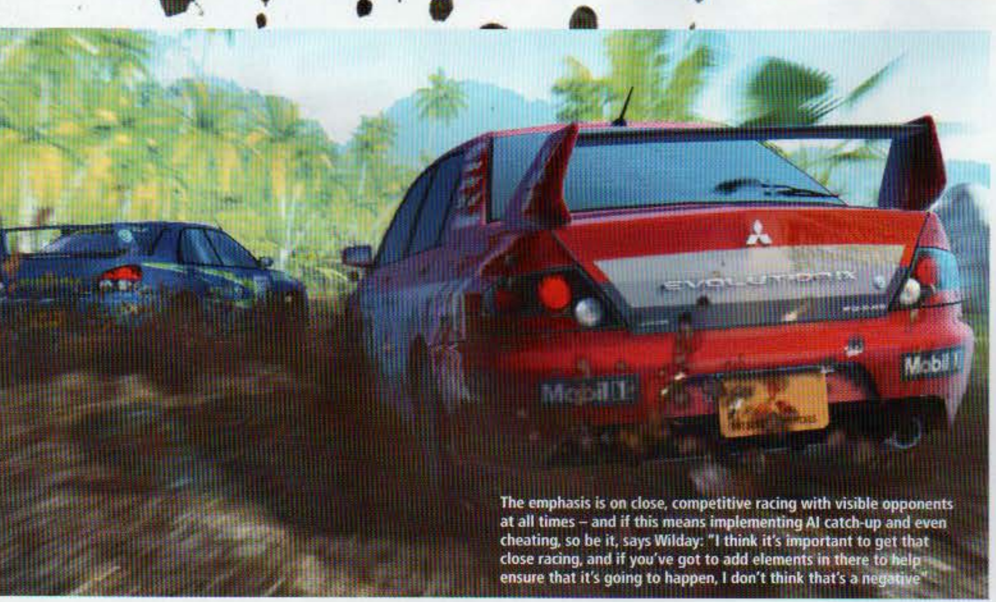
"Off-road is about a changing track environment," says Wilday. "If they race the same stage twice it's different the second time. It's one of the attractions over tarmac, where to an extent two laps are exactly the same.

"We've been talking about it for a long time, it's been in our heads for a number of console iterations and really this is the first time we've had an opportunity to try and get it working. It was the gameplay possibilities that really excited me about it. The third lap of that race is trickier than the first, because the car's bobbling around all over the place, it's a bit more skittish. I think that's cool: your third lap, you're leading, it's a trickier lap. You've got to concentrate."

It looks extremely convincing in our demonstration; although a game of this sort can't begin to be assessed without sampling the handling hands-on, we're prepared to believe that it will feel convincing too, and provide *Sega Rally* with a compelling, subtle dynamic in both competitive racing and time-trial. But, lush looks aside, the track surface deformation is currently the only marquee feature in a what seems to be stripped-down, back-to-basics arcade racer.

Sega Rally will offer six-car races in eight environments, starring current WRC cars (both two- and four-wheel-drives), classics and bonus vehicles. The singleplayer championship will focus purely on racing against AI, and is, by Wilday's own admission, "primarily our mechanism for unlocking new tracks and cars... but at its heart this is a multiplayer racing game. The online modes are where this is going to be really special." There will be more variation in multiplayer race modes, he suggests.

In terms of car setup, Wilday's team rejected the idea that *Sega Rally* should involve any kind of tuning or performance upgrades, but three simple variants of each car are on offer: road, rally and all-terrain. Essentially these translate as low and fast for hard-packed surfaces, a gravel and light mud all-rounder and a slower, heavier, car with big suspension for coping with really rough ground. Each track is being carefully balanced with a mixture of surfaces so it doesn't



The emphasis is on close, competitive racing with visible opponents at all times – and if this means implementing AI catch-up and even cheating, so be it, says Wilday: "I think it's important to get that close racing, and if you've got to add elements in there to help ensure that it's going to happen, I don't think that's a negative"





When we say to Wilday (below) that at the core of the Sega look are the palm trees and blue skies, he laughs, defining Sega games as "the feeling that it's a great day in this world, this environment"

necessarily favour one variant over another, leaving your choice down to personal preference and driving style. "I don't think we're ever going to do a pure tarmac stage for that reason," confirms Wilday. "We're going to design all of our courses with the premise that if you're good in the variant that you've got, you can win."

Like the surface deformation, it's a solid, simple mechanic that marries the capacity of current hardware for physical realism with unfussy, seat-of-the-pants immediacy. But as much as Sega Racing Studio will be applauded by purists for sticking to *Sega Rally's* roots in arcade multiplayer, it leaves the game at a disadvantage in what will be a bitter mud-slinging match between the new generation of off-road racers. It has neither the dizzying breadth and physical detail of *DIRT: Colin McRae Off-Road*, nor the high-impact, belligerent drama of *MotorStorm*, and it will arrive on shelves much later than either, in winter of this year. It also looks positively old-fashioned next to the structural and design ingenuity of more distant peers like *Test Drive Unlimited*. In all this, Racing Studio may have made smart and faithful choices, but are they choices Sega can sell?

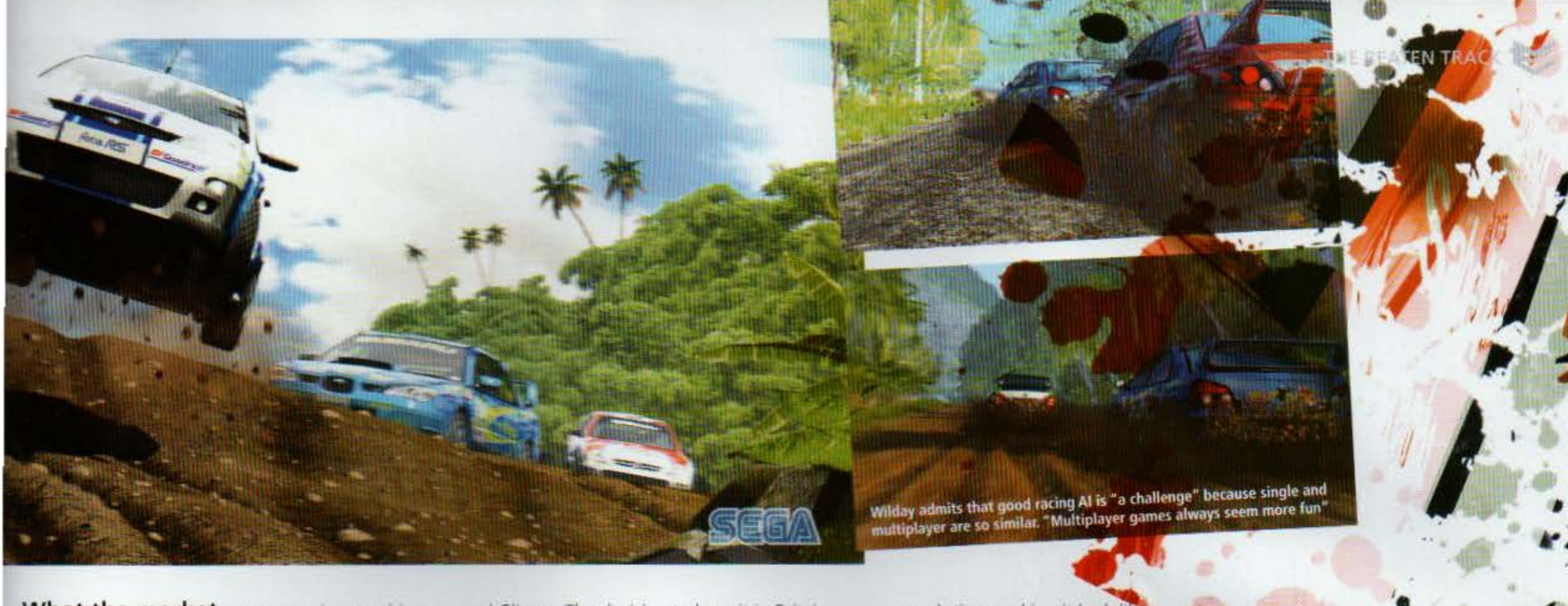


"The market's changing, and our hope is that this is actually going to hit what the market wants"

"There is a level of expectation, you're right," concedes Wilday. "Content and features becomes self-perpetuating, and the next title has to be bigger and better." But he thinks the public mood is actually swinging back towards the instant gratification of Sega's heyday. "From the research we've done, from the consumers we've spoken to, people are not playing games for the same periods of time as they used to, and they're playing games differently from how they used to. The expectation is different now, the games that they are going to play and enjoy are going to be more accessible and have faster turnarounds. It's about competing and racing and having fun and playing online with your friends. That seems to be what the current crop of gamers are after and what they want. I think the market's changing, and our hope is that, as opposed to looking retro, this is actually going to hit what the market wants now."

That many fans can't be wrong

The original *Sega Rally Championship* is "the most successful arcade game that Sega has ever developed, from a sales perspective," states Wilday. No mean feat, considering the pedigree of its stablemates; but the best compliment you can pay it is that, 12 years on, *Sega Rally* cabs are still out there in arcades all over the world, and still making money. "We really did have trouble getting a machine for the studio. We spoke to the arcade division and they had to go out on site and find one. When they brought it in, they said you should check the cash-box figures – it could quite easily have taken £500,000. A single machine." How come it was so successful? "It's just a joy to play, and even if you lose you feel like you could have won, you don't feel cheated. I think it's just a really well-balanced game."



Wilday admits that good racing AI is "a challenge" because single and multiplayer are so similar. "Multiplayer games always seem more fun"

What the market wants now is something Sega Racing Studio is very actively concerned with. The new outfit, currently 50-strong, was officially born in April of last year from the same, post-Sammy-merger drive to expand in western markets that led to the acquisitions of Sports Interactive (*Football Manager*) and The Creative Assembly (*Total War*). "I think it was an acknowledgement that in order to appeal to the western markets, games needed to be developed here," says Wilday. The difference being, of course, that his is an all-new studio, and one that provides the missing link to Japan and to Sega's rich heritage.

Why found a new studio rather than acquire one of the UK's many racing specialists? "I'm sure they were looking," he says, "but it was an opportunity to do something new. We're pulling talent from a whole load of studios," he says, mentioning Rare, Rockstar North, Codemasters and Climax. The decision to base it in Britain – the home of *Project Gotham, Burnout, Colin McRae, MotoGP* – was more of a no-brainer. "The UK racing titles really are, in my opinion, the best in the world. So there's a lot of talent here, a lot of really good experience. The UK in general's got a lot of motorsport heritage, if you look at it. It's obviously something that's in this country's blood."

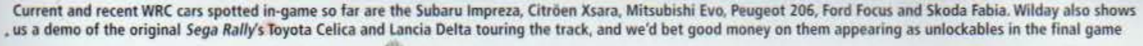
The hard part has been, and will be, to meld that petrol-head outlook and the determined drive to make games in the west, for the west, with Sega's aesthetic, values and intellectual property in a way that makes sense. "Do you know, it's been really difficult, actually," Wilday concedes. "It's a lot easier to make a realistic next-gen game than it is to make a stylised next-gen game, if that makes sense. We had our technology looking very realistic really quickly, and we've spent probably as much time making it look like a next-gen Sega game as we did making it look real. It's something that we didn't quite anticipate at the time. At the same time, it's been a fantastic challenge."

As to what challenges are next, Wilday says his studio's remit is exactly as broad as its name and refuses to rule anything out, from taking *OutRun* out of AM2's hands ("never say never"), to developing a hardcore sim ("I absolutely wouldn't discount it"), or updating *Daytona* ("It's held in a lot of fondness by myself and a lot of people in the studio, so... we'll see"). "We're definitely planning on developing more than one game out of the studio at any one time," he adds, and the studio is already concepting its second game – an all-new, original title. "It's very different," he says. "I'm looking forward to talking to you about it because it's a bit special."








Current and recent WRC cars spotted in-game so far are the Subaru Impreza, Citröen Xsara, Mitsubishi Evo, Peugeot 206, Ford Focus and Skoda Fabia. Wilday also shows us a demo of the original *Sega Rally's* Toyota Celica and Lancia Delta touring the track, and we'd bet good money on them appearing as unlockables in the final game


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Serious and sly, Metal Gear Solid is an enigmatic series with a complex history. But could the next instalment be the last chance to get under Snake's skin?

There's a stark contrast between the trailers Konami used to promote *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots* at the E3s of 2005 and 2006. A sense of event surrounded them both: hardly surprisingly, considering the sensation *Metal Gear Solid 2*'s trailer had caused at E3 in 2000, and the pride of place Sony gave to them in its big PS3 press conferences. But where 2005's was a laugh-out-loud riot of in-jokes, slapstick and self-mockery, in 2006 we were presented with a mournful mini-epic – 15 minutes long, in its uncut incarnation – whose shocking final image was of an exhausted, careworn, elderly Snake putting his gun in his own mouth.

Between them, the two cinematic teasers perfectly encapsulated the two poles of the *Metal Gear* series' personality: one playful, irreverent, self-aware; the other dramatic and deadly serious, prepared to tackle philosophical and political themes with an almost clumsy earnestness. Though they might seem opposed, *Metal Gear*'s two moods have a lot in common, and between them contribute a great deal of what makes **Hideo Kojima**'s stealth-thriller series so unique among blockbuster action games. The pathos and humour of *Metal Gear* games makes them very human, when most of their macho peers, the *Gods* and *Gears Of War*, are anything but. And their preoccupations – be they subtext, meta-text or just plain text – mark them and their creator out as having something to say, and the guts to say it.

The *Metal Gear Solid* games (and indeed their late-'80s ancestors for the MSX, *Metal Gear* and its sequel) have always been about war – the Cold War in particular – and what it does to soldiers. But they've never been set in a war zone before. With *Guns Of The Patriots*, the series' debut on PS3 due later this year, that is going to change.

Following the retro excursions of the third entry in the series, *Snake Eater*, and the recent PSP follow-up *Portable Ops* (set in 1964 and 1970 respectively), *Guns Of The Patriots* returns to the very-near-future timeframe of *Metal Gear Solid* and its sequel, *Sons Of Liberty*. However, the undertones of its setting could not be more acutely contemporary. Though there will be other locations, the one seen so far is a war-torn Middle East, and the images of rag-tag, dust-blown gunmen riding flatbed trucks could be from Baghdad or Kabul. It is proposed that political power is crumbling in the face of business interests, and there are constant, artificially-sustained wars between private military contractors all around the world, fought by machines and genetically-engineered, mind-controlled mercenaries.

It's on to this never-ending battlefield that the greying Solid Snake is thrust. Though only a few years have passed since *Sons Of Liberty*, his cloned body is ageing unnaturally fast and he only has six months to live. His mission is to track down and eliminate Liquid Ocelot (an amalgam of two previous antagonists, Liquid Snake and Revolver Ocelot), who secretly controls five of the world's largest mercenary armies. With a military power as great as the USA's,



It's easy to read Snake's premature aging as a reference to the weariness Kojima often expresses over the tasks of managing his studio and dealing with the pressure of expectation from the series' millions of vociferous fans

CODEC MOMENT
METAL GEAR SOLID
"PUT YOUR CONTROLLER ON THE FLOOR"

A minor test of stamina next to *MGS2*'s unending dénouement, the demises of Metal Gear Rex, Gray Fox and Liquid Snake at least tied up one set of loose ends without creating another – a good sign for those expected closure from *MGS4*. As ever, the whole would be greater than the sum of its parts, in this case a comprehensive gauntlet of action movie tropes, including a precariously positioned fistfight, a damsel in distress, a ticking bomb, a selfless sacrifice at the 11th hour and an I'll-tell-you-before-I-kill-you speech.

Liquid aims to turn the whole world into a soldier's utopia, Outer Heaven.

The connotations of this plot are considerable, but let's consider the gameplay implications first. The rigid framework of infiltration of enemy bases, taken as read in most stealth games, has been abandoned. The soldiers Snake encounters will be neither necessarily friend nor foe to begin with, and it will be up to the player to read and manipulate the battlefield to achieve his objective. Snake will be able to befriend some parties and antagonise others as you see fit. There will be considerably greater tactical flexibility: for example, enemies' emotional state will have a bearing on their alertness and willingness to hunt Snake down, and it will be possible to simply scare them off. But the environment itself will be much more dynamic too, offering less reliable cover. Improvisation will be de rigueur, and as in *Snake Eater* it will often be necessary to hide in plain view, though less laborious thanks to Snake's Octocamo suit (see 'Gadgets of the Patriots'). As if to symbolise the move away from formal stealth, Kojima Productions has scrapped Snake's trademark wall-hugging stance in favour of a more realistic, less stilted use of cover.

Metal Gear has always had a strong and sober anti-war message. Kojima's deep distrust of conflict has been present since the beginning

Although the scope for *Guns Of The Patriots* to present something of a departure in play style is considerable, thematically it will very much reinforce the previous games. Despite featuring violence, fetishising weaponry and trading on a sort of neo-militaristic cool, *Metal Gear* has always had a strong and sober anti-war message. Kojima's deep distrust of conflict has been present since the very beginning, and indeed was inherent in the first MSX game's conception in 1987.

That game's creation of the stealth genre was in part down to a reaction against destruction being the only way to surmount any obstacle in the videogames of the time. Kojima was simply tired of all the shooting, and wanted players to try hiding instead. It, too, featured the concept of a mercenary-run nation called Outer Heaven amassing devastating power in order to kick back against the political forces that routinely manipulate and betray soldiers; a monster of

A B C D E F G H I J

CODEC MOMENT
METAL GEAR SOLID
"AN UNDYING SHADOW, IN A WORLD OF LIGHTS"

The boss battle gets the first of many extreme makeovers, Kojima literally putting his name to the surreal showdown between Solid Snake and Psycho Mantis. It established *MGS'* unlikely penchant for supernatural twists, together with its creator's explorative approach to videogame hardware. Teasing you with secrets gleaned from your memory card and turning your joypad – and companion Meryl – against you, Mantis proved that if there was one thing better than a powerful foe, it was a resourceful one.

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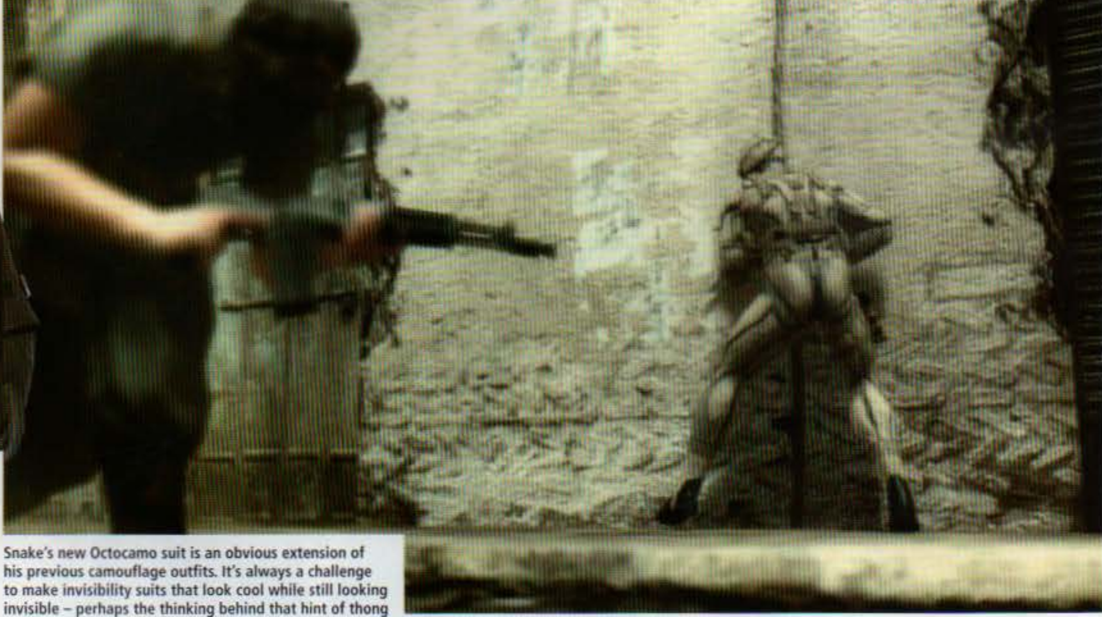
the world's own making. In that instance, the mercenary in charge turned out to be Big Boss, Solid Snake's commander and genetic father (and the star – under the codename Naked Snake – of prequel adventures *Snake Eater* and *Portable Ops*). Ramming home the cyclical futility of war, he betrays Snake, just as his commanders betrayed him.

This theme has recurred in almost every game since, from Snake's former comrades, the FOXHOUND unit, going renegade and holding the world to ransom in *Metal Gear Solid*, to the rebel FOX unit's utopian ambitions 30 years earlier in *Portable Ops*. And the shadow of nuclear paranoia has loomed large over them all too, in the form of the titular Metal Gear itself, invariably the secret weapon that Snake must track down and destroy. Of course, this kind of apocalyptic MacGuffin has been omnipresent in Japanese culture ever since the atom-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II. But it's seldom been damned so explicitly; Kojima's nuclear nightmare is a giant bipedal mech, a distressingly human walking weapon. It is not so different from the game's cloned and genetically modified soldiers, who whether heroes or villains – and including Snake himself – are always automatons to some degree, seldom in complete control of their own actions.

It's not yet known whether there's a nuclear *Metal Gear* lurking in wait at the end of *Guns Of The Patriots*. It would be surprising if there wasn't, but to an extent there doesn't need to be, thanks to the prominent presence of the GEKKOU: a small, mass-produced, biomechanical mech designed for urban warfare that will be one of Snake's main opponents in the game. These agile and strong war machines are a powerfully uncomfortable mix of organic legs and angular, robotic turrets, and they've been given frightening animal characteristics, bellowing like enraged bulls. They're a more personal and omnipresent enemy than a Metal Gear, in keeping with the game's presentation of war as an everyday routine, not a looming threat; their violence isn't apocalyptic, but physical and graphic. Kojima's Cold War preoccupations are, it seems, giving way to more contemporary political concerns.

Wherever its plot will lead, as it stands,





Snake's new Octocamo suit is an obvious extension of his previous camouflage outfits. It's always a challenge to make invisibility suits that look cool while still looking invisible – perhaps the thinking behind that hint of thong



Guns Of The Patriots' scenario forms the series' most complete and outspoken pacifist manifesto yet. Its vision of war is self-perpetuating and free of ideology, an end unto itself, and absolutely pointless. Most importantly, it will put Snake in the middle of that war, the better to illustrate its point. But *Metal Gear* games don't just stand out for having a political angle and an unfashionably worthy peacenik message. The vicious circles they deal with are personal, too.

As if to undermine the futility of conflict further, in *Metal Gear* you're often not just fighting your own side, but actually fighting yourself. When *Metal Gear Solid* revealed that Solid Snake had been cloned from Big Boss, it retroactively recast the two MSX games as an Oedipal tragedy in which Snake had fought and killed not just his mentor, but his father and mirror image. *MGS'* own antagonist was Liquid Snake, another clone

GADGETS OF THE PATRIOTS

Like the James Bond movies that inspire it, *Metal Gear* is to a large extent about the tools and how you use them, even if they're no more than a pack of cigarettes. *Guns Of The Patriots* has two headline technological toys: the Octocamo suit, and the customisable guns. The suit is a high-tech development of the camouflage system in *Snake Eater* that allows Snake to instantly blend in with whatever texture he stands by – or indeed, take it and carry it away with him, in a uniquely flexible kind of character personalisation.

The game's arsenal – more realistic than previous entries, though it will feature some more fantastical weapons for 'game design' reasons – can be extensively modified with the likes of grenade launchers, scopes, laser sights and silencers, and Kojima Productions promises a surprising amount of variation. It's also possible that there will be a collection aspect, encouraging players to trade their guns with each other.

This would bring *MGS4* in line, to some extent, with the thinking of the recent *Portable Ops*, which had heavy customisation, collection and multiplayer interaction built into its squad system. As with *PO*, some kind of online multiplayer is confirmed, but it's possible that this won't make the initial release, turning up instead as a download or accompanying a special edition (as was the case with *Subsistence*). PSP connectivity – quite possibly with *Portable Ops* itself – will also definitely be included, but what form it will take is anyone's guess.

Given Kojima's enthusiasm for exploring every possible kind of player interaction in his games, support for the Sixaxis' tilt sensor can be taken as read, although it's unconfirmed as yet. The TGS in-game trailer showed some supine firstperson aiming – with the gun moving in a parabola, left to right – that would perfectly suit tilt input.

CODEC MOMENT
METAL GEAR SOLID 2: SONS OF LIBERTY

"METAL GEAR HAS ROOM FOR ONE"

Announcing the rise of Revolver Ocelot (now under the influence of Liquid Snake's grafted forearm) from incidental loose cannon to show-stealing antagonist, the theft of Metal Gear Ray was a startling display of early PS2 power, Kojima already showing mastery of his latest moviemaking toolset. More than spectacle, the sequence ushered in a new era of motion-captured expression and virtual cinematography – talents to be thoroughly tested as the game moved to the unremarkable (on the surface, at least) Big Shell.







The war-zone setting means that combat will be more direct and head-on. It's not yet clear if Kojima will take advantage of the Sixaxis' motion-sensitive controls to emphasise this

CODEC MOMENT

METAL GEAR SOLID 2: SONS OF LIBERTY

"TURN OFF YOUR GAME CONSOLE RIGHT NOW!"

No longer content to just toy with input devices, Kojima would sabotage every aspect of the man/machine interface as *MGS2* entered its final act. Codec conversations succumbed to distortions of both audio and reality, the identity and motives of your supervising Colonel changing more improbably with his every word. With a phoney 'Fission Mailed' screen, intrusive flashbacks to MSX *Metal Gear* and video feeds hijacked by nonsensical FMV, it was a reminder not just of information design's importance, but of its potential.

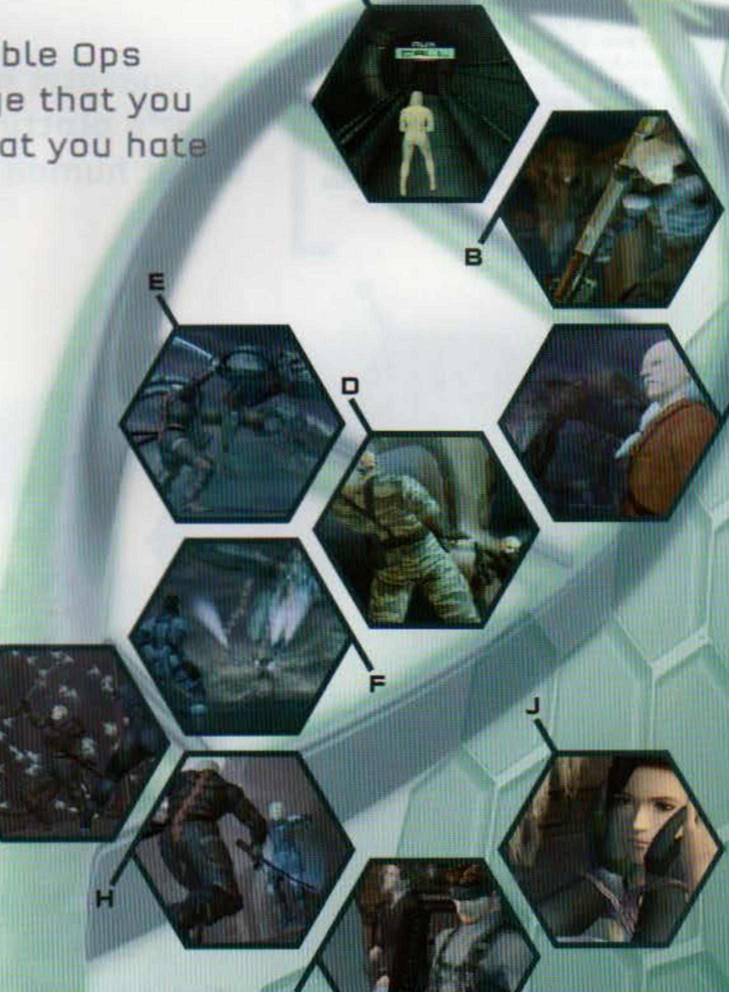
of Big Boss and therefore Solid's genetic twin brother. Just as Big Boss had done, he betrayed Snake, by posing as his former coach Master Miller and tricking him into activating Metal Gear.

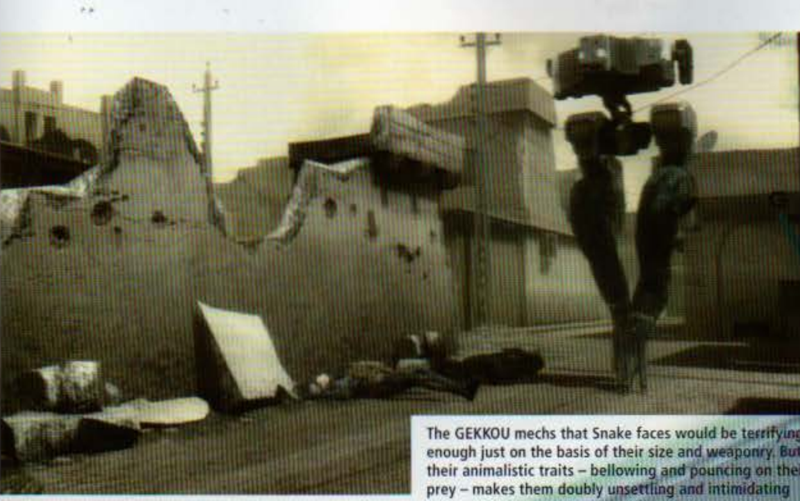
The existence of a third clone, Solidus Snake, came to light in *Sons Of Liberty*, and again he was the villain of the piece, insofar as these games have villains. As if the echoes weren't strong enough, he had been a father-figure to Raiden – the surprise protagonist of most of that game, and so Solidus' eventual opponent, providing the series with a second metaphorical patricide. And his accelerated ageing process meant that he resembled Big Boss, much as Snake does in *Guns Of The Patriots*.

Snake Eater and *Portable Ops* reinforced the message that you eventually become what you hate by casting original bad guy Big Boss as an almost identical hero to Solid Snake, living almost identical adventures. Now *MGS4* resurrects Liquid Snake by having his personality completely overtake the body of henchman Revolver Ocelot, who, it transpired in *Sons Of Liberty*, had had Liquid's right arm surgically attached. Another game, another version of himself for Solid Snake to destroy.

But perhaps, in *Guns Of The Patriots*, Solid's worst enemy will be his actual self. This side of the game is necessarily still shrouded in mystery, as Kojima's games with identity tend to provide his biggest plot twists. (One recent trailer raised questions by briefly showing a young-looking Snake – another clone perhaps? Or a disguise?) But it's clear that Snake will fight a constant battle against his decaying body, needing regular (but still unexplained) injections and frequently having to use passive manoeuvres – including actually playing dead – to avoid direct conflict. This could provide an

Snake Eater and Portable Ops reinforced the message that you eventually become what you hate





The GEKKOU mechs that Snake faces would be terrifying enough just on the basis of their size and weaponry. But their animalistic traits – bellowing and pouncing on their prey – makes them doubly unsettling and intimidating



The *Metal Gear* games have always been about the cost of playing soldiers, but the new game seems particularly sensitive to the fact that those embroiled in wars often have more in common than their opposing sides suggest

CODEC MOMENT

METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER

"THE FEEDING RAMP IS POLISHED TO A MIRROR SHEEN..."

A better curveball than Raiden could ever throw, the dumping of Naked Snake into all but James Bond's tux (beat the game for that one) marked a post-*MGS2* rediscovery of Kojima's creative liberties, and moreover his desire to simply enjoy himself. As if the wandering POV opportunities created by Eva's chest didn't set the agenda, the latest of Snake's Patrick Bateman-style eulogies – in *MGS* the Alaskan Caribou were the subject, here a lovingly-crafted pistol – pressed *Snake Eater*'s tongue firmly against its cheek.

exaggerated version of *Snake Eater*'s exhaustion mechanic, in which Snake weakened gradually over time if he did not eat. Above all this is the ominous spectre of that suicidal image from the E3 trailer, and with it the suggestion of the ultimate self-destruction, the implication that it's the only way the circle can be broken.

It's no coincidence that *Metal Gear* came to prominence with the first *Solid* on the PlayStation, and that Sony has held it close to its bosom ever since. Sony sought to redefine the image of gaming, and Kojima's ambition was to redefine its scope. The game he produced was absolutely emblematic of everything the PlayStation marketing promised: sophisticated, emotive, cool, cinematic, story-driven, self-aware. It didn't matter whether or not the majority of players engaged with its more serious themes on any meaningful level, but it mattered very much that they were there, giving validation to the entertainment form, lending it weight and a very different flavour.

It's for this reason that players put up with the biggest side-effect of Kojima's narrative ambition: the interminable cutscenes necessary to churn through the exposition of his labyrinthine conspiracies, and to provide the dramatic high points his suspenseful, non-confrontational gameplay couldn't. They inevitably put the game at a distance, but for a little while that's what we all wanted anyway – not because we were ashamed to play, but because we wanted a little perspective and breathing space, the better to sit back and drink in this brave new world.

Here was a game that was absolutely unafraid to do what other media did, and never mind whether it did it well or badly (in

As operatic and implausible as it is, Metal Gear's plotting carries a potent message about human nature's struggle with itself

As operatic and implausible as it is, this side to *Metal Gear*'s plotting carries a blunt but potent message about human nature's constant, unavoidable struggle with itself, and parallels extremely neatly the stories' political dimensions, whilst equally avoiding any good-versus-evil polarisation. But as much as they can tell us about the game's creator, these rather gloomy, intellectualised subtexts can't explain the series' popularity and success. Or can they?

A B C D E F G H I

CODEC MOMENT

METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER

"THE ULTIMATE FORM OF EXPRESSION"

A timely example of Kojima firing on absolutely every cylinder, the sheer immediacy of visual drama in Naked Snake's discovery, capture and torture offset any qualms about *MGS*' swollen dialogue. A brutal clash of personalities surrounded an increasingly bloodied hero, Snake becoming one of the first since Leisure Suit Larry to wet his own pants on-screen. Motosada Mori's reliable influence over the series' close quarters combat took the fisticuffs to another level, while Ocelot's Russian roulette juggling act is arguable its finest single moment.

A B C D E F G H I J

terms of dialogue, acting, plotting and direction, *Metal Gear* often veers from brilliant to excruciatingly gauche in a heartbeat). Here was also a game that was unafraid of negative space – of non-interaction, quiet, motionlessness. The stealth genre may have become a cliché since, but at the time (certainly in 1987, and still to an extent in 1998) it was a reversal of the constant barrage of input and output that characterised videogames' first age. That, for an artform going through a tumultuous adolescence, was vital.

And finally, here was a game that – contrary to appearances, and the common misconception that it actually wanted to be a movie – was unafraid to be a game. So unafraid that it would actually step outside itself and point the fact out to you. This is another of Kojima's reflexive feedback loops, and though it has much in common with the darker political and personal themes, it finds its expression very differently – in knowing humour. Ever since Big Boss told Solid Snake to give up and turn off the MSX, *Metal Gear* games have broken the fourth wall and addressed the player directly. *Metal Gear Solid* famously asked you to look for a clue on a CD case, meaning the game box itself, and had Psycho Mantis use his telekinesis (read: rumble) to make the controller move of its own accord. Increasingly – especially in the special editions of the second and third episodes, *Substance* and *Subsistence*, and in *Snake Eater* itself – the games contain plentiful jokes at their own expense, particularly concerning the controversial adoption of Raiden as lead character in *Sons Of Liberty*. And Kojima is surprisingly happy to let Snake mix, to comedic effect, with much more traditional videogame peers: the apes from *Ape Escape* in *Snake Eater*, or an all-star Nintendo line-up in the forthcoming *Super Smash Bros Brawl*.

Just like Snake, war and human nature, Hideo Kojima has *Metal Gear* be in conflict with and feed off itself – a profoundly serious-minded game series that cannot take itself at all seriously. This time it's a productive and happy contradiction rather than a destructive one, though, as this balance has been central to an unusual series keeping its charm and vitality for 20 years, ten of them in the brightest of spotlights. There's every sign that *MGS4* will uphold the tradition, while expanding the possibilities. But there's just one worry. *Metal Gear* got where it is by taking a stand and keeping some distance, but finds itself at loggerheads with the fashion for seamless immersion and subjective storytelling. Is the old warrior's time up? Kojima, who swears this will be his own last stint at *Metal Gear*, thinks it might.

"It's hard to kill a hero," he admits. "But to be honest I'd like to. Next year will be his 20th anniversary. I want to reveal all his secrets. I want to close the saga. I don't know what the people who replace me will do – maybe they'll feel the need to go back to Solid Snake, maybe open a new chapter. As far as I'm concerned, *MGS4* will deliver everything I've wanted to."





It's confirmed that Otacon won't appear himself in the game, but he'll be represented via his playful mech. It's a typical Kojima approach which ties together gameplay, character development, and an opportunity for slapstick



BIG BOSS

Just to prove that Snake's never alone in facing new challenges, his creator discusses the trials of growing old and powerful in the house of Kojima

For a man forever answering questions about his games and himself, the founding of a new studio can't have made life any easier. What, you might ask, does the name Kojima Productions mean for the autonomy of those who work there. What does its insignia, shared by early *Metal Gear*'s FOX organisation, mean for its portfolio? During a visit to its Roppongi Hills headquarters, we did our bit to fill out **Hideo Kojima**'s tireless schedule.

You've long expressed a desire to have your own studio, developing games you always wanted to make. Has the reality of Kojima Productions changed your mind?

A game needs a producer, and a producer needs knowledge of management. When I develop a game now, I not only have to produce it but manage the *company* as well; it stops you using all your time in a creative way. I'm 43 years old now and I don't have the same vitality as when I was younger, so in those moments when I can work, I'd like to spend as much time as possible creating. I've yet to find anyone, however, who can take that management job from me.

I should stress that I didn't necessarily want to make a new company so much as work like a freelancer. I don't dislike Konami at all.

So why create Kojima Productions?

Well, previously my team or department was included within the Konami group's game software division. But this company doesn't have to be just about videogames: it also makes toys, foods, magazines, music, videos and content for online and mobile phones. It's given us possibilities we didn't have before.

And regarding those games you 'always wanted to make,' how big is that stockpile of ideas?

I have many but I find it quite difficult to express them in words – they're quite difficult to explain. When possible, I assign them to someone I have full confidence in and then work with them as producer. Sadly, because I have to split my time between both management and production roles now, I can't work on all the ideas I have and they do just accumulate in my mind.





Can we take *Kabutore* (see p65) and *Boktai* as examples that made it?
It's true for *Boktai*, but *Kabutore* was Okamura's idea. He submitted it during our hour-long morning meeting and I found it so interesting that we decided to go with it. So I'm working as producer and supporting its development.

Do you see yourself as a father figure?
I'd rather think of myself as a friend, but yes, I could indeed be seen as a father. I can't stop myself from wanting be at the place where the games are being developed, and though there are around 550 people to look after I still need to be with them. If you get cut off from that for just half a year then it's very difficult to get back, and when you become a manager there's a strong chance of it happening. I want to avoid that. To me, I'm at the very same level as anyone else at Kojima Productions: I eat the same food, though I have a longer neck when it comes to looking around and finding visions.

But with so many projects in development at the studio, doesn't this create a desire to control them all?
I need to see how each project is doing, though if I get too involved then I do feel a need to see them through to the end. So I try to set myself limits: for one project I'll just check the design, for another I'll produce, and so on. If it's a personal project – like *MGS* – then I develop it myself to completion. But if someone tells me about an interesting idea I'll draw a line so they can develop it freely, as they imagined it.

In a Hidechan [see 'Talk Hideo' below] discussion with Grasshopper's Suda 51 you expressed an interest in making a text-based game. Do you still want to?
I'd really like to but I know it wouldn't sell. You just can't do that today.

Are you finding much time at the moment for playing games?
Not much. I start them but rarely finish them; I often ask other people to play them for me! I try to set myself milestone titles like *Gears Of War* but my free time often sees my in transit, so during that time I listen to music or read a book.

"There are just too many zombie games right now. Should I decide that the timing's right, then I'll take some time to prepare one"



Being a big Dawn Of The Dead fan, you must have taken an interest in Capcom's game *Dead Rising*.
It's a great game. I played it during TGS but, again, didn't make it to the end of the demo.

Have you considered making a zombie game yourself?
At least one. But the zombie idea I have is a bit different. I'm less interested in the idea of the living dead than the fact you can turn people just by biting them – that would be a great game system! I know that such a game has already been released but I'd like to offer a truly online version. Imagine a large town where half the inhabitants are zombies. Users would subscribe, get inside the town and get bitten. At that stage they become undead and can't control their character – all they can do is modify the camera angles. They'd see their character attacking humans and have to pay just to watch! The only way they could end it is by opening another account, hunting themselves down and killing themselves. Of course, the problem is that your second character can get bitten as well.



That's quite an online business model you have there.
Indeed! If you can't get yourself killed then you can call a friend for help. 'Please kill my zombie – it's roaming at that address.' When the zombies outnumber the humans the game will end.

Seriously, though...
To be honest, there are just too many zombie games right now. Should I decide that the timing's right, then I'll take some time to prepare one. Very seriously.



TALK HIDEO

Debuted last year and a permanent installation at TGS, the now bilingual Hidechan! Radio is more than the average podcast – it's an ongoing conversation between Kojima Productions, its fans, and its peers. "People of my generation used to listen to radio programmes to the point where they'd base their lives on them – you could ask anything on air about your personal life or your family," explains Kojima. "But today there's a lack. The internet is very popular, of course, but it's not popular enough for everyone to gather round it; it has its own language which is often aggressive rather than accessible. When I observed the blog explosion of two years ago, however, I realised that game creators need to have a direct relationship with users. So I started my blog as a test and it became just what I'd imagined – an experience similar to radio in which people were asking me about their personal lives.

"But at the same time it felt as though its readers were sad, hiding behind nicknames and trying to communicate important matters via words. Furthermore, typing can be quite demanding when you don't have sufficient time. So I switched to radio. Now when people think that game creators drive sports cars, wear expensive clothes and are with beautiful women, I can tell them that it's not the case!"

Photography: Hiroki Izumi



What about entirely fresh ideas? You've spoken positively of the DS and Wii in previous interviews – are they the beginning of a new creative era?

DS and Wii are presenting new challenges in terms of ideas, but they're still featuring technologies grounded in previous generations. They have unique features that allow us to do something different, but I'd have enjoyed them more if they'd come with more power, higher resolution graphics, and better capacity for realtime physics.

Several of PS3's promises have yet to be fulfilled, though. Few of its games have managed to achieve either 60fps or 1080p resolution. Does it really matter?

I don't really care about it to that degree. I don't think that so-called 'full HD' has any meaning in the game experience. What matters most for me is how to recreate a human smile or laugh.

So how is the PS3?

I'm not developing on PS3 because it's the best piece of hardware. That's not my approach. You could find a similar level of power on PC and I think the Xbox 360 could deliver a similar visual result. I am very interested in the *idea* of next-generation consoles, about what they can deliver in terms of experience. You could imagine a *Metal Gear* where you can interact with everything, ultimately destroy everything, and go anywhere you like. But the game design has to intervene and impose some order. If games become totally free then anybody can make them.

You can, for example, offer the possibility of targeting an enemy from a second floor window or from a great distance. But you need to evaluate the meaning of that within the experience, and also the impact it'll have on system requirements. You need to find the balance between the graphics, the level of freedom and the size of the environment. So, in a way, power doesn't necessarily change the equation as the elements within it stay the same.

It's had a slow start, though. Do you worry about the state the PS3 market will be in when *MGS4* arrives?

I'm not that worried, to be honest – it'll recover in time. Perhaps *Final Fantasy* will be the key to accelerating its growth. While the Wii is very interesting machine, people of my age want to enjoy themselves at their own pace. So as with books, movies and radio, they want games to offer this very relaxed experience. That need is still there and, in a way, *Metal Gear* wants to answer it.



Cramming stealth, action, role-playing, spaghetti westerns and vampirism on to a series of GBA carts, the *Boktai* games are as explorative and challenging as their reputation – for being 'the other Kojima production' – implies. In one famous instance, the solar sensor peripheral which dictates how and when they're played barred Scandinavians from playing them at all. Producer **Kensuke Yoshitomi** explains how, with the imminent *Lunar Knights* on DS, the series is wisely addressing that issue and putting the sun back in players' hands.

So what happened to *Boktai*'s solar sensor support?
We had various comments on the game but one really made us rethink our strategy. People from northern countries were telling us 'today – again – we've had no sunlight so we can't clear the boss.' Mr Kojima said that had to change. While we were designing the third version for GBA we were thinking about how to make so that people anywhere could enjoy it, even using that sensor. Then we heard that Nintendo had a new portable: 'Guys, it appears it's called the Nitro and it comes with two screens.' In no time we had a mail from Mr Kojima saying: 'The sun goes on the upper one!' That's how the concept changed.

The transformation of GBA into GBA SP swapped the position of the cartridge slot from top to bottom. Did this harm the Boktai games?
To be honest, when the SP was announced we were very anxious, especially since our sensor would have a very different orientation. But we got our SP, gave it a try and it appeared to be okay. None of the players complained.

For many outside of Japan, Kojima Productions is *Metal Gear*. Do you worry that the Kojima association might distort expectations of what *Lunar Knights* has in store?
I don't think so. I see the Kojima Productions label as a brand, and also a seal of quality which means that Hideo Kojima has checked and approved its level of quality and content. It's a positive thing. During development, I was presenting demos of the game on a regular basis and receiving comments and corrections.

Boktai, also, is like a kid version of *Metal Gear*. It's about stealth: you need to hide from vampires. We're turning the game from an action RPG into something very action-oriented, so sunlight sensor aside, our objective was to deliver a *Metal Gear* experience. We're not so different from the other teams working here.









STOCKS & BONDS

Responsible for some of 2006's most pronounced gaming double-takes, Kojima Productions' *Kabutore* is a stock market trading – and training – game with roles for neither movie references nor stompy robots. For **Noriaki Okamura**, the producer formerly responsible for *Metal Gears Acid 2* and *Portable Ops*, it's no less of a departure.

***Kabutore* seems somewhat out of phase with Kojima Productions' traditional image.**
Well, they say that Okamura at Kojima Productions is the specialist for the unusual stuff! Seriously, though, I really didn't think *Kabutore* could be done here. A couple of years ago I developed an interest in stocks. It was a time when Japan had a fever for it: the Tokyo stock exchange was performing well and you could buy tons of books about it, which I did. I realised there was a potential there for games. While I wanted to make it out of interest rather than a desire to educate, I did want it to be serious in a way that meant people could get something from it. In terms of quality and the way we create games at Kojima Productions, it actually fits perfectly in the picture.

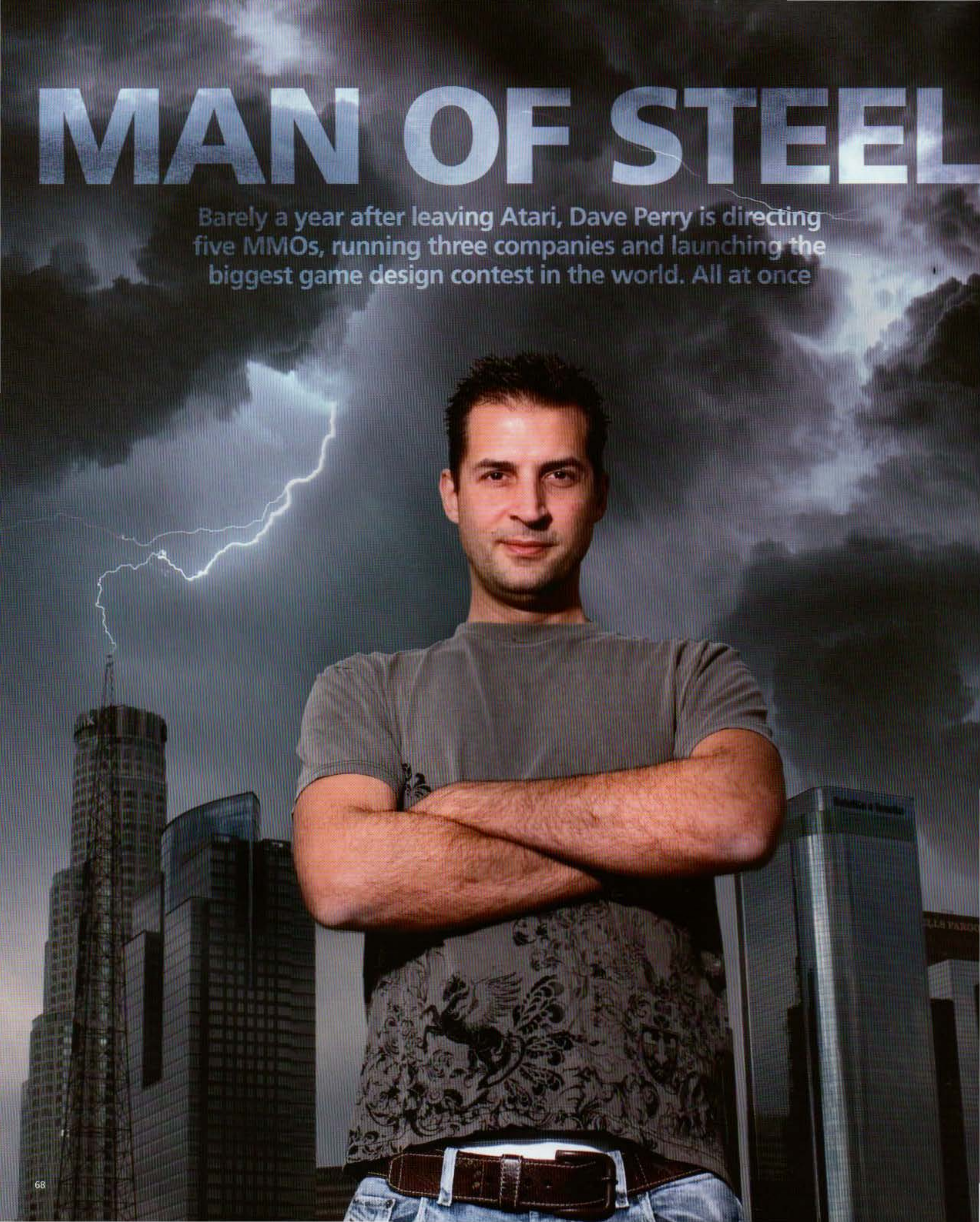
Is there a lot of communication between the different teams at Kojima Productions, or do they work separately?
Each morning we have an hour-long meeting, the directors and producers gather together with Mr Kojima in the middle. During that time we discuss progress and problems while also submitting new projects and ideas. So at this time there's a lot of communication between the teams. Of course, there are times when we speak to one another during working time as well.

Do you ever feel that someone is looking over your shoulder at work?
We're given lots of freedom. Mr Kojima isn't one to walk around giving orders, though on very critical issues, starting with the design phase, he likes to check that the project is in line with the studio's high standards. He'll advise and give his opinion on key elements from thereon in.



MAN OF STEEL

Barely a year after leaving Atari, Dave Perry is directing five MMOs, running three companies and launching the biggest game design contest in the world. All at once



Five years on from the sale of his studio, Shiny, to Atari (which has since sold it on to Foundation 9), **Dave Perry** is setting out to challenge every aspect of the games industry status quo, from game design (all his new projects are free-to-play MMOs: three unannounced, the RPG *2Moons* and the rhythm action *Dance! Online*), to the career path of developers (with his new Pop Idol-inspired Top Secret competition), to the planning and funding of development itself (with his companies Game Consultants, Game Investor and Game Industry Map). So just how will his brave new gaming world look?

You've said it was a trip to the far east which changed your career plans. What was it that you found there?

It's fascinating because there's so much to learn in that market. Over there all the games are free. They don't even use advertising, they use in-game item sales. So then you start to learn about the psychology of item sales, how does that work, what's that all about? They're masters at this now, the psychology of buying virtual items. I'm doing a game right now where you can get married. Say you've met a girl and you get on really well and you decide, just for fun, to get married in the game, do you buy her the cheap ring, or do you buy her the nice ring, or do you buy her the big fancy diamond ring? And the psychology there is interesting, because people have to actually sit there and think about it. And you say: 'Hold on, it's just a graphic, it's just three texture maps, and it costs us nothing to make these three texture maps' but, y'know, they have different prices because that's appropriate. And that's what they do in Asia. They've really understood how to keep the cost of the game free, and that's what I love about this stuff. I don't need $20 million to ship the game, and we can experiment with the most crazy, insane ideas, and it's perfectly OK.

What's more important for reaching out to new markets? A new financial model or new styles of gaming?

The thing here, and I'll be super clear about this, is it's all about the community. When I started making games, it was your game, and you made everything, but now the whole team makes the game and not you, and you're just steering a big ship and hoping that you end up at least close to the island you wanted to head for. But now it's gone even farther. I think we're basically beyond the team. These days, we're into taking care of the community. They are incredibly intelligent people. You've heard of the hive mind concept? You have all these people with ideas coming together, that's actually very powerful. And that's the thinking behind the top secret project we're about to announce. You know the TV show Pop Idol? The idea that you can go from being someone who wants to be in the music industry to probably the number one album the next morning? I've been thinking about that for the videogame business, and so have many other people, the idea of letting the community develop a game themselves. You've heard of the term 'user created content'? That means: 'Hey, we'll let them change the avatars'. Nope, this is like: 'We'll make the game together'. No one ever does it because it's very expensive and it's very risky and hard work to manage and wrangle the thousands of conversations that it would generate, but I've decided to do it. And the prize is going to be for the person I think helps me the most.

I'm going to offer them something that nobody's ever offered in this industry. I'm going to give a team – a fully-funded, guaranteed publishing contract for an MMO, and I'm going to be the executive producer for them. Basically, that means I'm not going to say 'go do it' and then abandon them, I'm going to help them, make sure they ship, and get all the resources they'll need. But they'll be the director of the title, earn royalties on the title, they'll basically have gone from zero to full director from their bedroom. It's just a new way of thinking about doing user-created content, but there's no book I can buy to help me plan this out – we have to work it out as we go along. It's going to have all kinds of teething problems and all the rest of it, there's going to be thousands of pieces of artwork submitted, and thousands of music tracks and everything else. But here's what's really cool about it – the game's going to be free, which means that everybody gets to download it, and show it to their friends, and play it together, and say: 'Hey, check this out, I did this'. And that's pretty cool – it's not like you have to actually buy the game to show it to somebody. The other thing is we're going to give a credit for everybody who actually manages to get something in, so they get an MMO credit for their résumé. That will actually help a lot of students.

How far on are you in making this work?

We're pretty far on – the first game we're going to do, I'm going to tell them where we're going to go with the game, so basically we have a direction to head off in. But from that point forward, the level design and all the mechanics and the pick-ups and all the art and concept art and audio and samples and everything will be up to the community. That's going to be really interesting.

Do you think that the user always knows best?

No, I think there's a need for a director. There has to be somebody to make the final call if you get a whole ton of ideas in. But do they have good ideas? Is the game going to suck if you use their ideas? There's no way – it's insane. I'll give you an example. For the

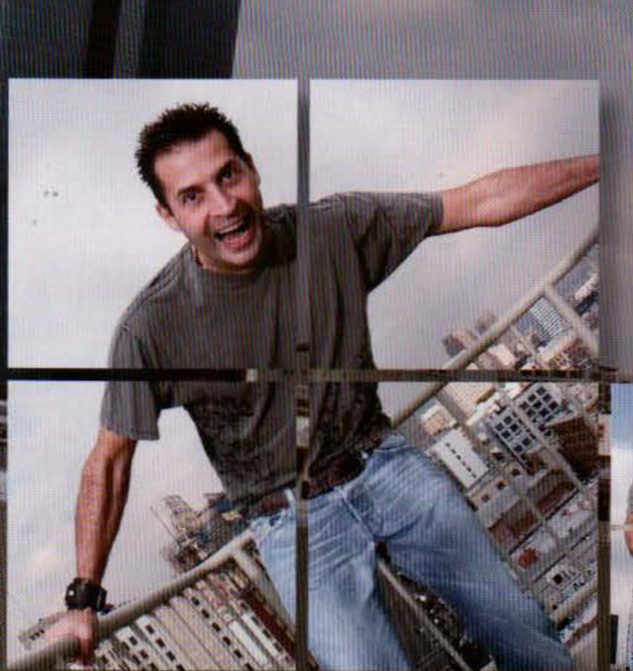


dancing game, I'm the director, and they said: "Could you send us the clothes you'd like them to wear in the game," and I'm sitting there thinking: 'The clothes? You need like, 500, don't you?' and I'm thinking: 'Where do I get that from? How do I do that? I think I've got good taste, but it's my taste, it's not anybody else's taste, so how am I going to do that?' So then we basically say: 'Hold on a sec, why don't we just ask the gamers?' Number

"I saw an opportunity to actually change the paradigm of ownership in the industry. It's what publishers don't want, but it's exactly what developers need"

one, it makes my job a little easier, and number two, we get it right first time. I could get it wrong first time – I could get it very wrong first time. For me this is very interesting, because I've been stuck in a console world for a long time, where you don't have any connection, really, to the consumers. It's only at the focus test that you get to say hi to anyone, but overall you just don't have that connection to consumers. So, it's a whole different relationship, you know.

Your other project, Game Investors, seems designed to create a whole different relationship between developers and their funding. How did that come about?
I saw some very frustrated developers – some triple-A talent, I'm talking the top guys in the business – the top ten designers in the business, and those at that level, getting frustrated with the publisher model, because today when you go to a publisher, the publishers will ask for a lot. They'll basically say that they want to own the property that you're going to make, and own the source code that you'll write. Some of them are actually ballsy enough to say that they'll take a piece of your company. Many of them ask for the rights on the next game that you make. And so, they basically ask for whatever they like, and to be honest, if they're the only game in town, people just sign. It's like record deals. People want to be a recording artist so bad they'll sign any piece of paper, and later on they actually find out what they signed. It's a very funny conversation when you then try and sell your company to the publisher, because the publisher then says: 'What do you own?' And you say: 'Well, nothing, because you own it all,, and then they say: ,We can't pay you anything for your company, then.' Then you're like: 'What? Are you serious? I've been working my ass off for you,' and they're: 'Well, there's no value here.' So you've got tables and chairs. So that's where the big money is in the development world – trying to find a way to keep your IP. So I basically saw an opportunity for investors not just to help, but to actually change the paradigm of ownership in the industry. It's exactly what publishers don't want, but it's exactly what developers need. That gives them more value, more money, and then I can trust the developers to be more creative over time than the publishers, because the developers will spend their money based on risks they believe in. Anyway, the point is, investors, their main goal is to help your company raise its value and the way to do that is to keep the IP in-house, so they'll fund you to hold onto your IP, so if you can sell for $150 million, they'll get their share. There's no company in the world that offers this service – there's no book I can follow, no template I can follow, so I'm just starting a company from scratch. It's called Game Investors, it's going to launch just around GDC, maybe just after, and it's about on the complexity level of eBay. But the idea with eBay is that you make the sale and you're done, whereas with Game Investors you have the bidding, but when the sale's done then you go into contracts and milestones and tracking the milestones. And the big big bonus with Game Investors, the thing that's going to change the paradigm is that if an investor wants to use our company we insist that there's money paid in advance. It sits in the account until the milestone is complete, and the second the milestone is complete it goes through to the developer. You just need to have a conversation with three or four developers about this, and you'll see the value of it. Nobody has the power to make that happen, but we will have that power because of the projects we'll attract. So say you have a game project and need a million dollars, then





Photography: Suzanne Bernel

you register and one investor says: 'I'll give you $500,000'. Then you only need $500,000 more. You can decide, as the developer, how many investors you're willing to work with. You might say: 'Look, I don't want to work with more than one, so that $500,000 guy can go away'. Alternatively you might say three is acceptable. Three is very normal in the industry. The point is that when the other investors see that somebody's already put $500,000 down, they're going to go: 'Awesome'. On the other hand, if they're a little concerned, if they're saying: 'I like this but I'm not sure', they can click a button and it sends a team of game design experts into that company – they can get on a plane and fly there and meet them, and do an internal review, just for that investor. And they come back and give them a report – it's a private report, it's not shared with the rest of the community, and that gives the investor the confidence to pull the trigger or not.

The point is that we'll actually raise the value from some of the developers, we'll also give them template contracts so they can see what is a good contract. We don't want anybody getting killed. I don't want the investors coming in and killing a developer, or the developer taking advantage of the investor, and then the investor never comes back. That's not going to happen either, so we're going to be very careful about the business side of things, to make sure that the relationship stays rock solid with everybody. We understand the developer's needs, but we also understand the investors'.

Going back to in-game advertising, do you think there's always a solution, or are some projects just unsuited to it?

No, I think there'll be multiple solutions. I ran a poll on this exact question because I was interested to see what the users thought, and 97 per cent agreed with me, so I'm absolutely as confident as heck on it now, which is that advertising is acceptable to the western audiences as long as they get something in return. To sell them a game for 60 bucks and then have advertising everywhere and spyware built in, it's just absolutely slapping them in the face. Whereas if you say to them, what I do in our *2Moons* game is that the advertising can be turned off. This is an idea that's radical – you can just turn it off. If you really have an issue with it, just turn it off. You can turn off our revenue stream, but that's just fine with us, because we do not want that guy going on the boards flaming us. I want them going on the boards saying: 'This is the coolest company in the world. I hate advertising and they do not make me watch it.' On the other hand, if somebody turns it on – why would they turn it on? The poll that we did was: if you could turn the advertising off, who would turn it off? And guess what the stats were? It was 100 per cent. That was like: 'Oh dear.' So all those games that are doing it right now are just ramming it down people's throats. And secondly, it's not good for the advertisers to know that they're ramming this stuff down the throat of people who don't want it. So then we ran a poll: if you had a button on your remote control to turn the adverts off on your television, would you press the button? The answer was: 'Of course. I hate advertising on television'. So then the question is, if you had another button to turn it back on, but from this point forward all your pay-per-view movies are free, would you turn it back on? That's when I got my 97 per cent response. It's like: 'Absolutely'. The most valuable thing to a player in an MMORPG is experience, so if I was to double your experience points while advertising is turned on, how many would turn it on? And they say 97 per cent, and the reason is the exchange is worth it to them. They're getting something that really matters. But if I said I'll give you a pair of green trousers to wear, it would probably sit at one per cent – the guy that liked green trousers.

Let me give you another example, this is something else that I'm going to be working on. It's the concept of 'just in time' advertising. There's still no adverts on the screen, but I'm sitting in the item store looking at the sword, going: 'That sword rocks'. But it's ten bucks – I'm not going to spend ten bucks on it. Then you play the game for another month and come back and go: 'God, I wish I had that sword, and there's no way to get it'. But what if the game then popped up a little box that said: 'Coca-Cola's just offered to buy the sword for you. Will you accept? Yes or no?' And that's the entire advert over. Your exchange with Coca-Cola is the most positive exchange you've ever had with them other than getting free Coke in the mail, right? You're like: 'What? I'm getting it for free?!' You can say no, but I didn't even need to





bother with the poll for that one. It's a positive exchange between the advertiser and the consumer, and we can work out a rate with Coca-Cola to buy these magic swords at a ridiculously low cost, because they're virtual items. We can have a wonderful impact on consumers. This is the kind of thing I want to lead the advertising people to start to think outside the box of 'we're trying to turn games into magazine, and just stick adverts all over the place'. That's just the wrong direction. That's like me saying: 'Oh, my loading screen's only ten seconds, but I'm going to make it three minutes because I'll make a lot more money that way'. That's just ridiculous.

What is the biggest misconception the industry has about itself?

Two things. I think the audience is potentially much larger than we're aware. The investment community for example gets very excited when it hears that *WOW* has eight million players. But then you look at *America's Army* which is a free title, that's got eight million, too. But both of those titles have very specific audiences. I hope that somebody gets it to the point where it's not *WOW* in the form that I have to pay for it, it's completely free, but it's also not about a subject that is narrow – it's on a wider subject base. There's going to be some people, could be the new people who think differently from us, or it could be the veterans, who do some studying and come up with some superb combo. I'm looking for the game that isn't niche, but pulls in about 20 million people – when somebody gets that, I think everybody's perception of what the games business is about will change. Forever.

It'll be like: 'Oh my God, this industry is crazy.' But the question I would ask, is do you think anyone will ever find that game?

If they do, it won't be a game anymore...
I agree with you there, very perceptive. I think it will be an interactive entertainment, but I think it'll take interface designers, artists – I think it will be one of our teams that pulls it off, but it won't be a game. I agree with that. It'll have some game or fun elements, or maybe learning from games to keep you sticking around, but I believe strongly that somebody will work it out.

But imagine you take this to the next level and into game worlds, and you tie up details with those people, and you bring all of that content into the gameworld too, so you're able to experience it virtually anywhere on the planet – you don't have to get in your car and drive to the theatre, you can get your best friends you hang out with online, wander down the road and walk into Wembley Stadium – the virtual version – and watch whatever concert. James Blunt's on over here, but in Berlin right now, Cher is playing. You want to walk over to the Berlin stadium and watch the live feed? That's going to be experiences that I can't have today, and it's going to be those sort of things – if you knew that to go to these concerts was going to be free, that you just had to log into this game – those are the kind of things where the 20 million numbers are going to show up. If you're an artist, you can go and have a virtual gallery and have hundreds and thousands of people come to it. You can change your pictures any time you like, and sell them. The crossover between the virtual worlds and physical world will happen where there'll be plenty of places in a game where you can purchase a real item. We're experimenting with that idea in one of my games. Is this all gonna happen? I can't see it not happen. Bringing more valuable content into virtual spaces? I can't see it not happening. Trust me there are people working on this right now – nothing as big as I'm talking about, but there are all the steps we're going to need to work out to get us to making things like that, but I think that would be interesting. I would check it out. We already have the technology to do most of it.

Do you think we're going to end up stunting the human desire for exploration by creating such compelling facsimiles?
This is a big question too. I just wrote an article in Business Week that said: 'You are going to achieve a point pretty soon where you walk into a room and you're not going to be sure if someone's watching the Superbowl or playing the Superbowl. It won't be that obvious.' It'll look pretty damn good. With the right voices of the commentators, and the lighting and the shadows, and sweat on people and physics on the ball and everything else. At some point we're gonna get there. But the point that's very very relevant going forward, is how many of those games do you want after that? You know, I've experienced that now, it was cool, it was brilliant, it was *Madden 2015*. Whatever the year is it doesn't matter – we've now experienced it. Do I now want *Madden 2016*? But then I point out that we're going to get very tired of it very quickly, and then we're going to go into what I consider a radical change of life, we're going to go into the fantasy world where – we're already there to a certain extent – but we're going to have people make new sports that don't exist, but are true sports. So they'll come up with a new baseball, that is team-played from around the world, that is really fun to watch because it's designed that way – maybe there's audience participation in some way – they're going to come up with new sports and new things. I love the Harry Potter books simply because the author came up with Quidditch. I read that book and thought: 'My God, this is exactly what I'm talking about'. Someone's not just talking about this silly sport, they're actually trying to make rules for it and turn it into a real sport. And that can be realised in a world, and out of those 99 per cent will fail, but somebody will come up with a sport that people will find really fun. And those people are going to become the future Will Wrights, the ones that can take us somewhere we've never thought about going before, but on the other hand that are able to keep the industry thriving.

I don't think that future is a negative one, but you're going to have to have an incredible level of creativity. Imagination, because – you know how all the Disney songs are about imagination? – and I go to Disneyland now and think: 'You're not kidding'. In the future, the value of imagination is going to be so much, because it's not about copying, it's about having a real imagination, and still trying to understand what motivates people and what they find fun. And that's when us old seadogs will finally be laid to rest.

"In the future, the value of imagination is going to be so much, because it's not about copying, it's about having a real imagination"



Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Guitar Hero II



The real test of your favourite game? It's the one you unpack first when you move house. Even if it does require clearing a large rocking-out area among the boxes
PS2, ACTIVISION

Rhythm Tengoku



If for nothing else – the idiocy, the invention, the dance it makes you do as you play – then simply for the fact that it makes you look forward to boss levels again
GBA, NINTENDO

World Of WarCraft



The real game, of course, was watching the resolve of lapsed player after lapsed player crumble in the face of tales of new loot and the wonders of Outland
MAC/PC, VIVENDI

String theory

Knitting up the ravelled sleeve of play



Crackdown's freedom gives its players enough rope to hang themselves, but at a bit of a price

We think of games as being made of pixels, mostly – a perpetually evolving mosaic of light. But games like *Crackdown* reveal another truth: they're really made of string.

Not to suggest for a moment that *Crackdown* is a ropey title – on the contrary, it's a Tonka truck of a game, robust and appealing. But it serves as a very neat statement of the problem that modern games face. It's a game that offers unrivalled freedom – no levels, no missions, no unnecessary constraints – but which, in doing that, pulls the other end of the string out of the player's reach. Because, as that freedom is extended, the inevitable consequence is that the player has to stretch themselves, reaching out for the inspiration, the creativity and the challenge that in a more structured game would be provided for them.

But it's not just the old tension between freedom and structure which reveals the strings that hold games together. *Supreme Commander*'s immense battles give you more scale and detail than ever before, but cause you to pull back to a point where you're playing on an icon-heavy map screen which could have been generated a decade ago. *Hotel Dusk* is that great rarity, a game which delivers characters and a plot that qualify as properly engaging, and then finds that their appeal undermines the interest the integrated puzzle aspects can exert. *The Sims Life Stories* tries to tug EA's most popular game a little further towards the mainstream – a terrifying prospect – but in the process risks pulling it out of dedicated gamers' hands.

It's perhaps a controversial theory, just like string theory in the real world, and perhaps a slightly pessimistic one – suggesting as it does that as games try to do more they'll find themselves more hobbled than ever before. But, just like string theory, perhaps we're getting to a point where technology is finally becoming sophisticated enough to let us see the threads that underpin everything we know. And that may tell us more about the real potential of the medium than ever before. After all, could there be anywhere better for games to belong than a universe with 11 dimensions where nothing can be proved wrong and everything is made out of half-pipes?



Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



CRACKDOWN

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £45 RELEASE: FEBRUARY 23
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: REAL TIME WORLDS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E172



Xbox Live co-op is as open and unconditional as anything else in *Crackdown*, two players dropping into the same world to conspire as they wish. Just how well it'll hold up on release, though, is something that's typically difficult to predict



Melee combat consists of just one all-purpose roundhouse kick that becomes powerful enough to punt vehicles as well as kill with one strike, its one-button simplicity allowing it to blend in well

Crackdown isn't where most you'd imagine free-roaming gaming going next. No – it's where you'd want free-roaming gaming to have come from. Its belief in play for play's sake is rare, and will be as dissuasive for some as attractive for others; anyone wanting a direct extension of *GTA* will walk away disappointed. Despite *San Andreas* integrating many, many ideas into its world, its roots always felt in danger of coming free, somewhat shaky around the trunk; *Crackdown* is very nearly all trunk, one made of granite and with roots that, even under the most strenuous of improvisational mischief, hardly ever come loose.

You play a law-enforcing Agent, a budding superhuman, in Pacific City, a world powered by a superheroic game engine. And – to reiterate for completeness – your goal is to defeat 21 gang bosses, seven in each of the three interconnected districts, each district overseen by a kingpin that can be weakened by taking out their generals. Just how you do this, and in what order, is your decision, as is the manner in which you beef up your Agent through five major skill sets – gunplay, explosives, melee, agility and driving – which upgrade in accordance with your actions.

As sandpit games go, *Crackdown* feels like it has masses of sand but few toys; and so it's your imagination and willingness to engage that are key to drawing out everything it has to offer, rather than just being shepherded by mini-map icons or a checklist of tasks in order to fatten an empire. Your Agent's abilities are immense: build agility by collecting the green orbs scattered around the game world (visible from hundreds of feet away and tempting you into many a high-rise diversion as you skip from spire to outcrop), and the ground covered by your leaps eventually soars out further than the draw distance of many a *GTA* clone. Weapon lock-on has greater influence still, attaching to enemies (but not civilians) on distant rooftops or far below in the streets, offering body-part selection with the right stick. Consequently, there's no ability to hot-swap between targets without drawing a fresh bead, which makes fights feel sticky to begin with, but means you can rely on your reticule attaching to the nearest target. Since it also tracks objects that can be detonated or picked up as well as vehicles (which, more successfully, offer their own localised targeting, including tyres and fuel tank) gunfights can seem awkward to pick your way through with finesse, but then it's often not needed. *Crackdown*'s engine supports havoc, evidenced by the escalating explosions your Agent is capable of wreaking in great numbers as gang members pour in from all directions, whether you're simply mopping up arbitrary street thugs or punching through the walls of henchmen surrounding a crime lord.

> It's your imagination and willingness to engage that are key to drawing out what's on offer, rather than just being shepherded by mini-map icons

And defeating these bosses, seamlessly present in the world until you take each down, rarely involves a conceited, pre-scripted showdown, the shootouts themselves defined more by the layout of their hideouts rather than the target hits themselves. Each is a fluid set-piece open to whichever assault you choose, and the complexity of some of the hideouts – rife with back doors, underground passages and, if you're smart enough, the odd cheeky window – usually only becomes clear *after* you've defeated the boss and explored their stronghold. Which is where Time Trial mode comes in, placing you back at the front door of a respawned crime lord, allowing you to shave their execution down from several minutes to something much slimmer, a



Given their minimal lifespan, excessive numbers and firepower, the question of enemy smarts is one that needn't ever be asked, although they're capable of swiftly shooting out tyres and flinging junk as you drive past. Getting involved in incidental skirmishes will often escalate into bedlam











Even against a backdrop of neon-rainbow buildings and intense pastel skies, colourful prompts are still visible across great distances, from the green/purple shafts that mark out race events to the alluring flare given off by hidden tokens and agility orbs



The few character customisation options – with change offered every time you re-enter Pacific City – reinforce how much faith Real Time Worlds has in the appeal being down to what your Agent can do, not what you can do to your Agent

gratifying slice of replay that, once again, manages to showboat the flexibility of your role within the game world.

Take a clinical measuring tape to *Crackdown's* girth, as people so often attempt to do with RPGs – just how many hours of gameplay are there? – and the situation is just too elastic to provide an answer. You could spend just six hours 'finishing' your Agent's quest, or twice that while conscientiously nurturing your skills – both those of your Agent, and your own ability to exploit them – or more still, if you get sucked into setting a new airtime record for juggling explosive barrels. And again, once you find the giant metal bowling ball that can be ripped from the monument in front of the observatory. Or a rubber duck sat next to a penthouse Jacuzzi that can be flung ridiculous distances. And it's here that some of *Crackdown's* Achievements come into play, finally unlocking some of the system's worth by outlining goals based on skilful experimentation or high-score endeavour, alongside more typical completion aspects. There's simply no crude maths-crunch to explain just how much you get out of *Crackdown*, apart from one equation that endures in a manner that *Saint's Row* could never hope to match: what you put in is what you get out.

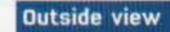
Crackdown's design isn't bulletproof. The lack of a quick restart for race events is an oversight, and there are very occasionally pieces of scenery that your brain has been trained to think your Agent can cling onto, but that offer no grip; also, the body-part lock-on available during firefights feels of little use for non-snipers, given the crazed pace and intensity of combat. But, compared to so many free-roaming games to date, it so rarely stumbles. It's the very skeleton of the genre, those bones strengthened to the point where they alone can stand as a game, rather than serving as hangers for threadbare ideas to be dangled from: Hollywood-wannabe casts and cutscenes, and exhaustingly trivial sub-quests. It's a daringly lean but quite fantastic action toy, a game that many won't be expecting but one that's successfully raised the bar for those that follow in its riotous wake. **[8]**





Crackdown's glare and thick-lined style won't be to all tastes, but it's hard to deny how inviting Pacific City is, best appreciated by scaling the Agency Tower and rubbernecking it all in one sweep of the camera

Outside view





Perhaps its very nature meant it couldn't be helped, but the driving aspect of *Crackdown* feels to be its most peripheral. In so many ways, your Agent is already such a capable vehicle – a sprinting, gun-toting cross between juggernaut and seven-league pogo stick. Vehicles can be used to barge into a stronghold or stunt your way into a complex, but it's easy to forget the option exists when your Agent's other four skills can be so sleekly accessed when on foot, and avoiding innocent casualties while behind the wheel can be tiresome. It's far from lazy – Agency vehicles make for splendid toys, giving you the power to flip oncoming traffic out of the way, crush them in your path or perform versatile aerobatics – but it feels like the domain of those who want to exploit *Crackdown's* details down to the last, in taking the time to rig up ramps for the most daring jumps, or compete for leaderboard kudos in race events.



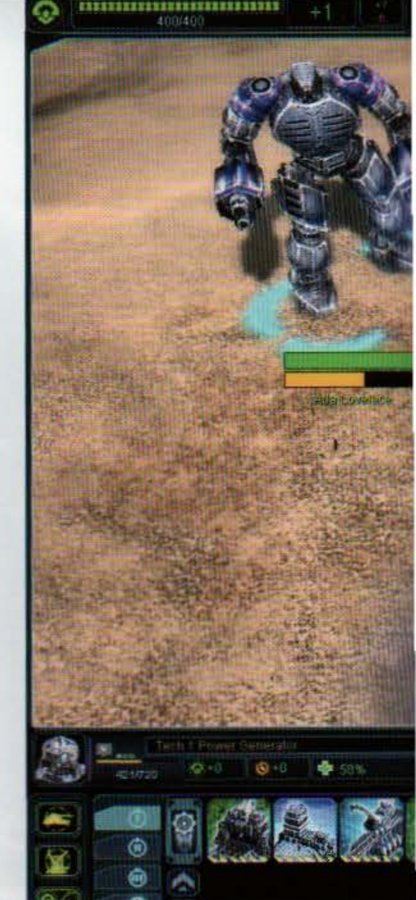
SUPREME COMMANDER

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: FEBRUARY 23 PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: GAS POWERED GAMES. PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E170



Like most RTS games, the more sophisticated units must be researched before becoming available. Their correct use can easily turn the course of battle





The various constructor units' visual effects are a sample motif for each of the three sides. The UEF (pictured) favour direct bright beams. Conversely, the Cybran have miniature droids that orbit rapidly, performing the task

If there's one trend particularly challenging to videogaming brand equity this year, it's the rise of the spiritual sequel. As once-popular brands sit fallow in publishers' trophy cabinets, designers are realising that all they really own are names and characters, not the ideas, mechanics and themes that are harder to tie down. It's always happened, but rarely have examples been as widely hyped as this year's crop. While the merits of *Bioshock*, Irrational's remix of *System Shock 2*, have yet to be ascertained, *Supreme Commander* shows that *Total Annihilation* remains one of the most singular strategy games of all time, no matter what name is written on the box.

The first convincing challenger to *Command & Conquer*'s RTS throne, *Total Annihilation* brought technical innovations (polygonal units, weapons following physical laws rather than vague rules) and a cold, hard atmosphere (it made genocide practically palatable). A decade later, its mechanics make up the core of *Supreme Commander*. Resource types are kept to a bare minimum of energy and mass, the former manufacturing the latter, and at the head of each of the game's three sides is a self-sufficient commander, capable of single-handedly manufacturing infrastructure and staving off enemies' tank rush attempts.

Supreme Commander's evolution, however, is one of scale. Where *TA* always leant towards the epic, this game's unit cap of 500 achieves it in earnest. More than anything else, it makes for a far fresher game than a ten-year-old design should allow. The RTS simply went in completely the opposite direction to the future *Total Annihilation* posited, following Blizzard towards highly detailed individuals rather than faceless masses. In contrast, scale leads to *Supreme Commander*'s most unique feature. A twirl of the mouse wheel pulls the camera back to reveal the entire battlefield, polygonal troops becoming simplified into icons. The game can be played entirely from this high level, and it proves indispensable for many aspects of play. The irony: despite it being one of the most demanding games currently available on the PC, for a good proportion of your time you'll be watching simple geometric shapes move across distant terrain.

While most of its modern peers boast



The ability to fight from a corner rather than succumb to a map-dominating foe means that even in the end-game, battles are worth fighting



Some weapons are so devastating they're visible on the zoomed out view. Some things really aren't meant for reduction into iconic representation







Death of the supreme commander leads to an instant nuclear explosion that will engulf any nearby opponent. It can be switched automatically for some carefully timed mutually assured destruction





While most modern RTSes have abandoned naval combat, *Supreme Commander* stays true to its inspiration with an array of destroyers, submarines and battleships

limited capture points to encourage deliberate expansion, *Supreme Commander* lets you abstractly relinquish control of the map in favour of massive energy production (then conversion into mass) and determined rows of defences. The ability to fight from a corner rather than succumb immediately to a map-dominating foe means that even in the end-game, battles are worth fighting. With unit types balanced so that an unmixed force can be easily wiped out, all it takes is one error from the opposition to be back in the game, lateral thinking and astute unit combinations ensuring devastating strikes.

And there's plenty of space – both physical and conceptual – for these tactical openings to occur. The only things grander than the clashing armies are the battlefields themselves, the largest skirmish arena being over 80km across. Starting in a limited area, each of the three sides' campaign missions open up gradually as opportunities arise. A single mission can take a couple of hours, especially when learning the intricacies of the game. Since there's so much space to cover, for once it's actually possible to manoeuvre forces through gaps in the enemy line, bypassing trouble and striking at soft targets. The computer opponent excels at this, probing your lines for weak spots and ruthlessly exploiting them.

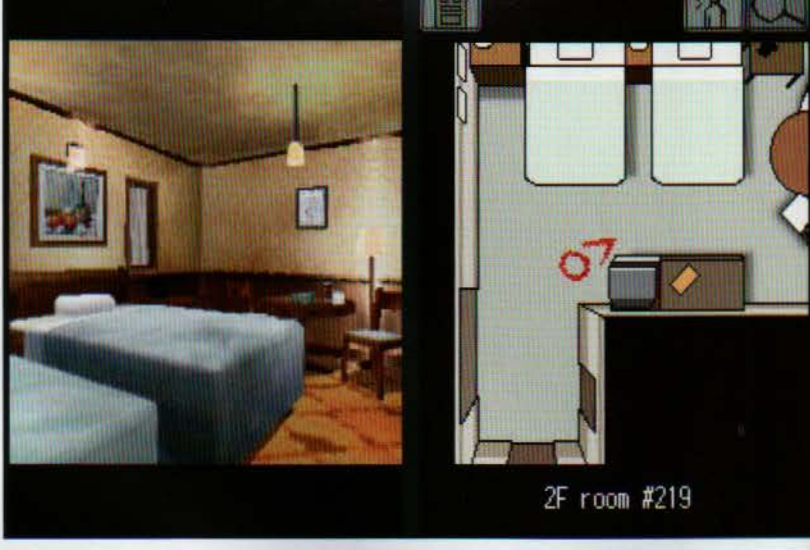
But while the lack of any significant unit chat adds to the ambience of chilly, mechanical death, everything but the nuclear explosions that end a commander's life pale next to the likes of *Company Of Heroes*. Also, while the higher level AI is intimidating in the best possible way, individual units have a foolish tendency to target opponents behind cover and take direct shots – strange considering how little cover there is. Really, a battlefield in *Supreme Commander* is little more than an expanse for the exchange of high-power projectiles.

What will most limit its audience, however, are the demands it makes of the gamer. Just because micromanagement is virtually absent doesn't mean its pace isn't utterly relentless. As much as the PC strains at the computational needs, human brains will struggle with how much concentration is required. Most of the game is spent mere mouse-clicks from disaster, and it hurts. You'll often find yourself a couple of hours into a mission and – no matter how much you're enjoying it – simply lacking the strength of will for the final push. In genre terms, *Supreme Commander* is the polar opposite of lazy Sunday-afternoon strategy: the anti-*Civilization*. With a name as apt as the infinite slaughter of *Total Annihilation*, it really is a supreme commander's job. **[8]**

Dystopia



A game of such wide-ranging slaughter requires a suitably apocalyptic setting. Set at the end of a 1,000-year war between three equally abhorrent sides, it manages an agreeably operatic intensity. It's not the most feasible of futures, but rendered in such detail and approached with such seriousness it's easy to lose yourself in. From alien-artefact worshippers to the dregs of cyborg post-humanity to the slightly-fascistic remains of common-or-garden humanity, their genocidal impulses are cruelly compelling.







Hotel Dusk's '70s setting is best expressed through its soundtrack. The brilliantly horrible muzak adds a fresh layer of sleaze to the grimy setting. Hero Kyle Hyde, while given plenty of tough talk, inevitably fails to make the same impact as day-dreamy Ashley from *Another Code*



While it's the scribbly character designs that take centre stage, *Hotel Dusk*'s watercolour backdrops are often brilliantly realised. The manner in which they blur as they approach the edges of the screens is just one indicator of the attention lavished on the game by its developers

HOTEL DUSK: ROOM 215

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $35 (£18)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: CING

By the book

Hotel Dusk picks up where *Another Code* left off in more ways than one, not least the desire to utilise the DS as an in-game object. Not content to make players hold the handheld like a book, *Hotel Dusk* makes them use it like one too, providing blank pages on which clues may be noted down. Sadly, one of the most interesting ideas turns out to be the most disappointing: things sour somewhat when the game starts to suggest exactly what you should be writing down, and then reminding you of anything you may have forgotten anyway.

As a novel, *Hotel Dusk* would be a page-turner. Its story, while rambling, clichéd and over-reliant on cheap enigma, is oddly compelling – and the characters are distinctive and often charming. As a game, in fact, *Hotel Dusk* remains something of a page-turner – and therein lies the problem.

In following up 2005's *Another Code*, Cing has crafted an experience that is similar in structure, but different in emphasis. Despite the punchy noir , the resulting game is even more slow-burning than its older sister – and it's certainly more crowded. Light years removed from the sunny emptiness of Blood Edward Island, *Hotel Dusk* has a full register of guests to interrogate, and the accent lies not with the puzzles, but the interaction.



One of the more interesting uses of Nintendo's touchscreen is when in-game characters use it to hand you objects. It's a welcome detail in a title that can otherwise leave players feeling like they have been left on the sidelines for long stretches of time

And it's the sheer mass of interaction that transforms *Hotel Dusk* into something of a trudge. *Phoenix Wright* may have shown that games can mint combat from dialogue, but here the conversations seem more like being stuck in a slow-moving traffic jam. It may be functional, but it's hard not to be worn down by interaction which relies so heavily on nothing more than clicking on the arrow that will bring the next line of text into view.

While the guests often have interesting things to say, *Hotel Dusk* lacks any real synergy between puzzle and plot. Ranging from the clever to the arbitrary, the challenges make good use of the DS's features, but often have little to do with the unfolding story. At times, the puzzles look like mere padding, and playing can feel like settling down to read a book only to have it snatched away at five-minute intervals by someone who wants you to make them waffles or do the laundry. Furthermore, the rigid narrative means that events move at the game's own dictatorial pace. You may already have grasped the solution to a puzzle, but *Hotel Dusk* won't let you put your thoughts into practice until it has decided the time is right.

Despite these irritations, the plot proves strong enough to keep even the most disappointed player clicking through the dialogue trees, and in the final chapters the endless conversations finally give way to something more engaging. Equally, the game's presentation is a triumph throughout. Much has been made of the A-Ha-influenced visuals, but it's far from a superficial piece of design: *Hotel Dusk*'s characters, although sketchy, emerge as real people, and the limited animations give proceedings a genuine emotional impact.

It seems almost cruel to begrudge a title that consistently displays such ambition, but while Cing's desire to innovate is admirable, the results keep you at arm's length. Meandering rather than contemplative, there's no doubting that *Hotel Dusk* is packed full of laudable ideas, but the consequence is that there's often no room left for the player. [6



KAITOU WARIO THE SEVEN

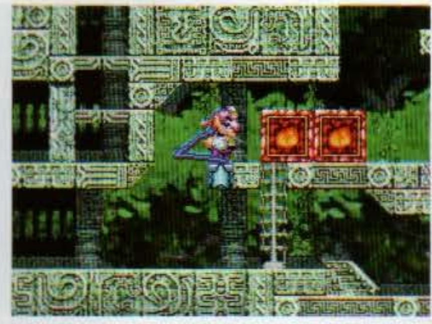
FORMAT: DS PRICE: $35 (£18)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: SUZAK PREVIOUSLY IN: E172

It's all about scale. While his arch-rival Mario was content to hide at the bottom of the screen, dwarfed by his environment, Wario has traditionally dominated it, a big fat greedy sprite determined to rob the world of every last penny. But in his latest adventure, the garlic-munching misanthrope has been shrunk down to a more manageable size, to disastrous effect. This time out, Wario has zapped himself into his television to steal the quick-change costume wand owned by the thieving Master of Disguise, a character in his favourite show. On the surface, with its ability-granting costumes and side-scrolling gameplay, *Kaitou Wario The Seven* may appear to be a direct successor to the *Warioland* titles, but it really owes far more to the *Metroid* series; progression is made by constantly backtracking through the interconnected rooms (shown on the top screen map) as you gain new key items and powers. The level design lacks *Metroid*'s elegance however, and you'll often spend large chunks of time trudging around in an aimless funk.

There are eight varieties of outfit (including pirate, Godzilla and Dr Wario) each with unique uses. Activated by using the stylus to draw various glyphs onto Wario's body, changing costume can be a fiddly affair, and it's quite easy in the heat of a boss battle to die as a result of accidentally selecting inappropriate attire.



Minigame activities include colouring things in, sliding blocks, squishing bugs, moving through mazes, tracing outlines, connecting the dots and even guiding poos into toilets. While they get harder as the game goes on, they never actually change in any significant way – something which leads to a deeply repetitive experience



The control system is unusually ambidextrous in that you can use either the face buttons or the D-pad for all your movement needs, with your other hand relegated to stylus and touchscreen duties. It frequently gets you into trouble, and it's all too easy to jump unintentionally when running

New suits are found by opening green chests on each level. Opening a chest of any colour activates a *WarioWare*-style minigame, although these efforts pale in ambition and creativity next to the originals. Not only are the minigames dull, there are only eight different varieties, and although they get progressively harder you'll tire of them long before you get to the end of the second level.

A *Wario* game should be about cackling at clichés and redefining the rules. But the DS elements feel forced, and there's very little in the game that couldn't be done just as well (and probably to greater effect) using a more traditional control scheme. Occasionally flashes of twisted brilliance emerge (at one point you force a boss to indulge in coprophagia – a deeply unpleasant first for videogaming) but largely developers Suzak (notorious for their terrible *F-Zero* games) shy away from going for the jugular. There's a desperate lack of innovation on display here; nondescript levels based around ice caves, pyramids and inevitable Mayan temples. The boring locations exacerbate the sneaking feeling that the levels, which can easily take an hour or longer to finish, are simply too large. It's all about scale, and Wario, one of the few Nintendo characters with, well, a character, should never be left to flop around like a small fish in a big pond. **[4]**





As in *Warioland 4*, the once immortal Loki of videogames has been subjected to the indignity of an energy bar



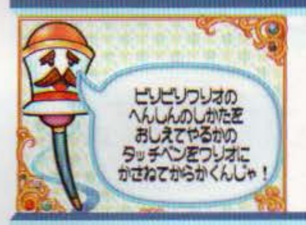


The different coloured chests provide different rewards. Green chests offer new outfits or upgraded abilities, purple chests offer items like keys or flamingos, and red chests offer cold, hard diamonds. Not that there's anything to spend them on, mind



Costumes can be upgraded once unlocked; so while at first the Dr Wario suit is only able to see through walls, a spring-loaded boxing glove is later added to its arsenal

Riddles of the Sphinx



Surprisingly for a platformer, *Kaitou Wario The Seven* is not very import-friendly for non-Japanese speakers. Aside from the reams of text explaining the plot, certain sections demand that you understand what is being said. In the third level, for example, you face off against a Sphinx who poses three random questions. You reply by drawing hiragana characters on the screen, but even looking up the answers is little help – you have to know the order to draw the strokes in too. Frustratingly, getting even one question wrong results in instant death.



SPECTROBES

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: MARCH 16
PUBLISHER: BUENA VISTA GAMES DEVELOPER: JUPITER CORP
PREVIOUSLY IN: E171

Spectrobes sees Buena Vista Games moving from the safety of the Disney-licensed shallows into the deep end of new franchise creation. It's not completely going it alone; in Jupiter Corp it has a fine buoyancy aid, inflated on the puff of *Picross* and the GBA's *Kingdom Hearts*, and by choosing *Pokémon* as a template it retains a firm grip of the poolside.

It's easy to see the pocket monster influence in the three-tiered evolution of *Spectrobes*' elemental-themed creatures, but what's surprising is how much more it employs the DS than *Pokémon*'s own *Diamond/Pearl* DS outing. Whereas monsters in *Pokémon* are still falling for the same old button-press ball-lobbing act that was enslaving them in games over ten years ago, Spectrobes are a wiser breed, adopting a fossilised form that demands touchscreen and mic manipulation to break.

Snuffle out a dig site with a child Spectrobe and excavation begins. The touchscreen represents layers of rock strata to be dashed away with a vicious poke before daintier tapping is used to drill around the fossil. Drill for too long on the fossil or smear earth-dissolving chemicals onto the monster-in-waiting and it will shatter, making for a sometimes tense experience as damage accrues on a particularly sought after creature. The mic is just as thoroughly employed. In an only initially hilarious fashion, fossils will only awake when submitted to voices at a certain volume. Talking is problematic as sound dips between words can cause too great a drop in volume. The only choice often available is to scream or utter an obscene throaty groan. Hardly the first noise the promptly scarred-for-life Spectrobe should awaken to.

Having innovated with its take on catching-em-all, *Spectrobes*' battle engine is more disappointing. Time spent raising your monsters seems wasted as clumsy collision detection refuses to let them plant a hit and you find yourself growing reliant on easy-button-combo special moves simply to avoid battling with the slipperiness of movement in close combat.

Most problematic, however, is that unlike *Pokémon*, with its lively, charismatic stars, *Spectrobes* presents you with a civilisation of creatures in desperate need of the Lazarus touch. Instead of the irresistible vitality of a cheeky Pickachu you're asked to be excited by a dead pile of dust. When life is finally shouted into the Spectrobes, you're met with further grimness as the game staunchly resists pinching their cheeks and cooing, instead casting a cold scientific veil of stats and techno-babble over what are in effect cutesy children's toys in the making. It seems Buena Vista has gone from making lacklustre titles out of much-loved franchises to making a reasonable game from the coldest of franchises. **[5]**

Feed 'n' breed



While monsters naturally level up after battle, some tactical depth is added by the possibility of shaping their fighting credentials by placing them in an incubator and feeding them lumps of the attribute-boosting minerals that are occasionally excavated along with fossils. Place two Spectrobes in an incubator together and they will bond, giving them a slight stat boost if they are combined again in future battles. Your own stats are also influenced by Spectrobes not actively fighting but placed on the 'substitution bench', the idea being that Spectrobes close to battle can lend their particular powers to their more involved comrades.

For a game that's a launch point for a cartoon series the story is seriously lacking. Alarms begin to ring when the enemy are introduced as the distinctly non-scary Krawl (with that hard K sound indicating just how evil they are)



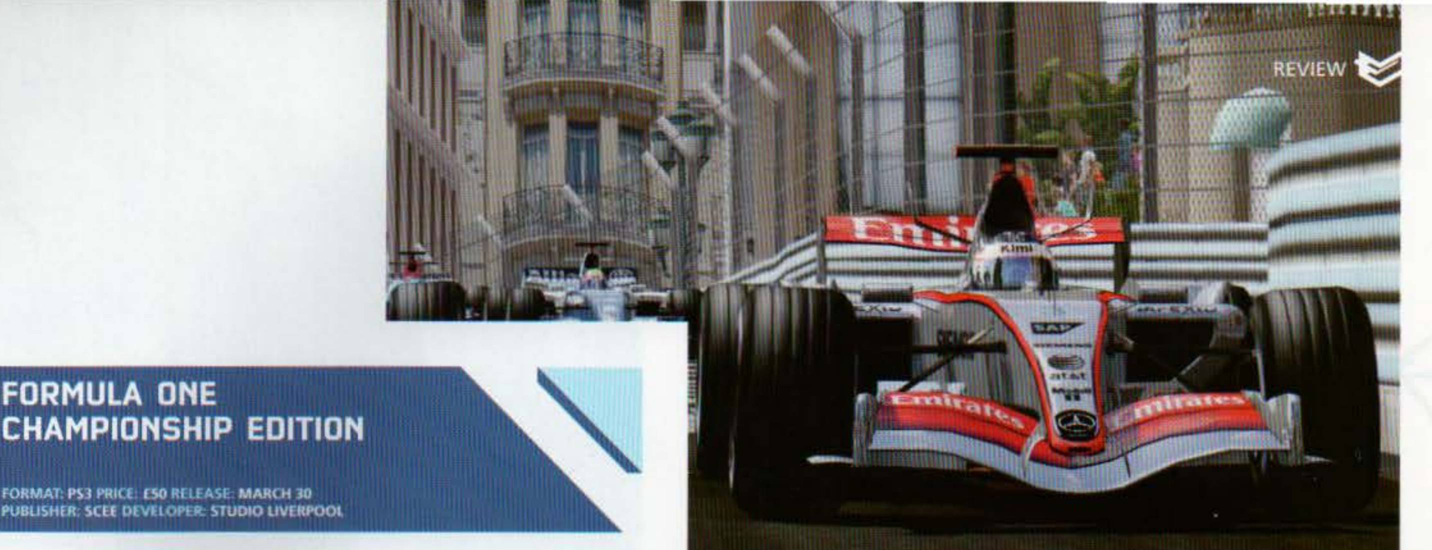




In their child state Spectrobes have no purpose but to act as truffling pig-esque fossil detectors. Tapping begins a scan, but due to the tiny diameter of the search area covering the game's large open areas takes a tedious number of repeat scans. New tools can be purchased to speed up fossil recovery – the sonic tool lets you shout rocks away, solvent dissolves debris and the Giga tool claims to offer automated fossil excavation



While 3D models certainly show up *Pokémon*, monster design is cluttered, with swirling body patterns making it hard to see where one bit begins and another bit ends



FORMULA ONE CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: MARCH 30
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: STUDIO LIVERPOOL

No business does hollow promises with quite such pomp as Formula One, so Studio Liverpool's choice of subtitle – *Championship Edition* – seems highly fitting. What other edition could there be? It's the Formula One Championship. In this way, they've managed to say even less of substance than if they'd just called it *Formula One 06*, which would itself have been dull. How very F1.

It's no better inside the box. The rising tide of options, the authentic splashes and waves of gorgeous reflection effects cannot disguise the simple fact the cars are awful to drive, with an entire handling model built around drearily numb understeer. Worse, the steering is woefully and systematically imprecise, as if the player is on a sled with rubber reins. Your actions do not translate directly to movement; you steer, you wait for the driver to catch up. And when he does, the car lurches inwards; the moment at which it does this remains for you to guess, as there are no audio or visual clues. And despite the van-full-of-lead feel on turn in, the cars are all ridiculously twitchy in a straight line, making them hard to place. Subtle alterations are near impossible. Accuracy is near impossible.

Oddly, EA took this approach to F1 control for years, which only made Studio Liverpool's brilliant early *Formula One* titles stand out even more. Quite why they've now adopted such a dismal approach themselves is a mystery, though it may be linked to attempts to recreate traction control. For all the simulated 850 horsepower and 3.5 lateral G transmitted through them, the rear tyres never budge a millimeter in any direction unless you put one on the grass. Traction control doesn't do this – not only is slip engineered in (to achieve the much-talked about 'balance,' the relationship of front and rear drift), but no amount of TC can save an overdriven car from sliding or spinning. Putting *Formula One Championship Edition*'s rear-ends effectively (and unrealistically) 'on rails' could account for the steering's strange ugliness.

The only way to glean pleasure from it is to bury yourself in strategy, which is at least authentic. Pit-stops which demand timed button presses are welcome, and screen overlays convey a huge amount of information regarding the state of your car, tyres and fuel. Generic radio messages about how well you're driving are less compelling and, frequently, unintentionally funny, given what's happening.

Still, it looks lovely. Those familiar onboard angles display wonderful realtime reflections and truly huggable tyre textures your HDTV will love. Replays require just a light squint to pass for real, especially in spectator mode, where not much happens. But as far as either an authentic simulation or a fun re-imagining goes, it's like some strange negative of the emperor's new clothes; the pretty wrapping is there but the body is not. **[4]**



Making Formula One realistic means the game inevitably suffers – the source material is expensively feeble. But while liberties are taken in the name of entertainment – there's overtaking – the base driving is badly misjudged





Car models are excellent, the game benefiting from increasingly tightly-wrapped, sculpted cars. The 'Viking' McLaren is a visual highlight

Painfully employed



Championship Edition offers both a straight world championship and a career. The latter centres around testing for the lower teams, meeting targets and moving up through the ranks, and it's surprisingly challenging even taking the control issues out of the equation – not least because pounding round tracks alone takes even more patience. It's perhaps inevitable, given the flux within F1 at the moment, that some things here should already be out of date – the invisibly dull MF1 team is now the rather more interesting, and more orange, Spyker, for instance – but otherwise qualifying formats, teams and drivers are accurate for the first half of 2006.



Double world champion Alonso (above), or overrated teammate Fisichella? With a sport that values advertising space even over visible numbers and easier recognition, perhaps an equally confusing digital replica is inevitable





ARMA: ARMED ASSAULT

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: 505 GAMESTREET DEVELOPER: BOHEMIA INTERACTIVE

Community detpack



Operation Flashpoint's community has morphed and squeezed the original game with legions of co-op missions, add-ons and 'realism packs', to total conversions that pit giant robots against each other. They're helped by the built-in editor: few create new terrain for their modifications but simply adapt the island to their own purposes. That philosophy continues with *AA*: creating a simple skirmish mission is as easy as dropping a few platoons of soldiers on to a map and leaping right in.

Death is everywhere. It's on the streets, where peering around the wrong wall at the wrong moment leads to a volley of machine-gun fire, snaps of bullets interrupting the bark of stray dogs. It's in the bush you ignored for a second too long, allowing a sniper to squeeze off one shot, ending your game in an instant. And it's in the time it takes to raise your rifle when you come face to face with an enemy soldier. As the clumsy animation and zoom comes to bear, he's already fired. Death is everywhere, but then so is the quick-save.

But then, simulations like this often come with real-world baggage. Driving a racing car is hard. As is flying a plane. And, it turns out, so is being a soldier. *Armed Assault*'s fault isn't that the game design is broken – in fact its simulation of warfare is often striking and always engaging. Charging into battle, seeing helicopters overhead, hearing the crack of bullets breaking the sound barrier, watching men flop to the ground when hit by an unseen aggressor is always heart-stopping and always entertaining. Its problem is what the missions ask of you: they are simply too tough. Trained soldiers would and should mutiny when asked to carry out the tasks *AA* routinely asks of you.

Armed Assault is patently, ridiculously unfair – not just at times, but all the time. In one mission, you're given three bazookas and a single satchel charge to blunt the advance of an army – take out five tanks, and kill the soldiers that guard them. Then, as reinforcements arrive to quell your one-man uprising, use the confusion to infiltrate a camp and steal some documents. It's too hard – next to impossible – and you will die repeatedly trying to finish it. It's the third mission. This was occasionally true of the game's predecessor – *Operation Flashpoint* – but nowhere near to this extent. For the now-combined community of *Armed Assault* and *Operation Flashpoint*, this is their dream game: a harder, technically stronger version. A game they can play and adapt to their own purposes – be it co-op missions or weekend-long multiplayer skirmishes. But those looking for a more casual relationship with play will be routinely broken by the game's near absurd difficulty.

Nonetheless, there is real potential here, even if it's often obscured. The technology behind the game is a schizophrenic beast: the engine occasionally planting you inside a badly textured bush, with a single pixellated leaf filling your screen; motion capture and AI sometimes combining in hysterical glitches as soldiers get stuck in a loop of ducking for cover. But at other times, you'll look out over a valley, the draw distance stretching out forever, and watch a column of trucks pass over your mines. It takes a second or so for the sound from the explosion to hit, which feels like a bug, but isn't: it's simply the time it takes for the sound to reach you. And it's that level of detail that will draw – and sate – *AA*'s masochistic market. **[5]**

For the hardcore, already initiated into *AA*'s simulation, the real thrill will come from online co-op missions. The game allows for any number of players and AI opponents, limited only by the host's bandwidth





AA's city missions are terrifying for their scale and density of enemies. Snipers on roofs, and machine gun posts stationed around every corner, make it a realistic, if rarely fun, challenge







The vehicles of *AA* are the best way to experience its enormous draw distance and scale. You can buzz your own troops from a helicopter or ambush enemies with a powerful, rapid firing nose-mounted machine gun





Woodland patrols become a disorientating nightmare that see you watching every shadow and gazing into bushes for hidden enemies. Forest firefights leave you bewildered and lost – and usually face down, stone dead



THE SIMS LIFE STORIES

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

The Sims was famously inspired by '50s sitcoms, but *Life Stories* is rather more closely modelled on Dawson's Creek. Giving you control of first Riley and then Vince (one's a girl, the second a boy, for those not up-to-speed on newly gender-neutral naming conventions), *Life Stories* extends *The Sims 2*'s idea of memorable life moments by bolting them into a teen drama plotline, full of minor infidelities, jealous neighbours and old flames. The reasoning behind this shift is to make the game more mainstream, giving newcomers to the series characters to play with from the off, and more conventional reasons to care about their avatars' adventures.

It's a sound idea, even if there are barely enough bones in *The Sims* to make it stick – characters are little more than a name and a job title – but there's still a sense of real vindication in asking that pushy blonde with her eyes on your boyfriend to leave and then flouncing off to bed. But of course, that greater normality in the story presentation comes back to bite whenever typically bizarre *Sims* moments arise, as they do – all too often in the bathroom.

But the greater success in retooling this game for the wider world is perhaps more in its mechanics than its presentation. Its much-vaunted 'laptop mode' (which amounts to little more than a suspend function), windowed option and humble minimum specs may come at the cost of low-impact visuals, but dramatically enhance its overall market. And what that market will find is a streamlined, sped-up and cut-down version of *The Sims 2*. With your hand tightly held and your needs and skill bars quickly refilling, there's little here to challenge or interest a graduate of the previous games – not even free-play mode, which ditches the stories in favour of the traditional create-a-Sim model, but keeps the 'lite' approach to the gameplay. The net result is a product that can't be faulted on its accessibility, but has less subtlety than ever with which to hide the inherently, and sometimes unrelentingly, mechanical process that caring for your sims represents. **[5]**



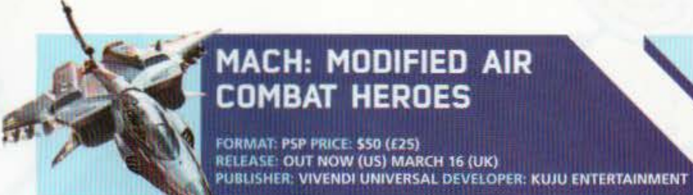
The Sims has always had a sexual undercurrent, but it rises to the surface in *Life Stories*, even if the rather syrupy chasteness sweetens the smut



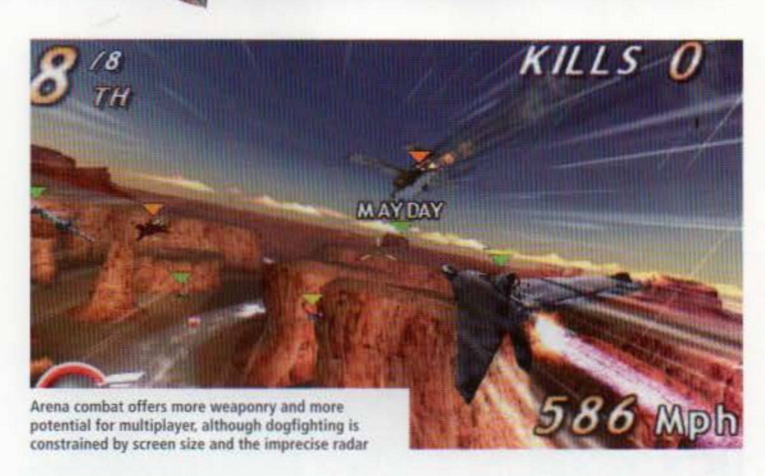
Although the story mode puts you in the shoes of a specific, named character, fairly extensive customisation options are available from the off



MACH: MODIFIED AIR COMBAT HEROES



FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $50 (£25)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US) MARCH 16 (UK)
PUBLISHER: VIVENDI UNIVERSAL DEVELOPER: KUJU ENTERTAINMENT



Arena combat offers more weaponry and more potential for multiplayer, although dogfighting is constrained by screen size and the imprecise radar

As the first combination of aviation and arcade to make it to the PSP, *MACH* has plentiful antecedents and no rivals, a state of affairs that goes some way to explaining a game that unites a series of successful ideas yet does little to apply its own stamp.

The backbone is solid enough, combining unashamed arcade racing with arena battles, and while both can be played on a map-by-map basis the real meat is in the fixed challenges that daisy-chain both forms together. Racing gradually expands to include coin collecting, checkpoint chasing and the occasional weapons upgrade, and victory brings cash which can be spent on new decals for your craft; the planes themselves are unlocked by successful mission completion.

And yet the whole is less than the sum of its parts; while it's hard to find any glaring fault, it's a curiously flat experience that doesn't stir the soul. The courses become familiar too quickly, and the few that are genuinely exciting appear too rarely. Most collisions merely scrub speed and boost accumulates automatically, making close racing a common but humdrum business, and there's little incentive to hold a perfect racing line.

Most critically, there's no real sense of speed: while there's a satisfying fluidity to combining a fast turn with a barrel roll to dodge an incoming missile, it's an experience largely untouched by adrenaline. The closest you get is the mild panic in arena battle when the camera suddenly veers off to track the missile you've just fired – a regular occurrence in a melee that feels disorganised rather than fast-paced, although there's potential for elaborate multiplayer battles.

While there are occasional sparks from things like laser weapons, or games of tag in the arena combat, too much time is spent racing the same courses at the same speed, with only a very gradual increase in AI awareness to differentiate each step up through the ranks. It's by no means a joyless experience, and were it to face competition then it might well manage to retain superiority for reasons other then exclusivity – but it could easily be eclipsed by a less polished but more personable rival. **[5]**





Weaponry has more than a hint of *Mario Kart*, but the ease of dodging missiles means it's easier to hold on to the lead



TRION CUBE

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥3,990 (£17)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN) TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Story mode is joined by arcade levels and endless options, plus multiplayer. Unlockable sounds and skins (the latter feels pleasantly homemade while the former favours goats and clocks) round out the package

Trion Cube is remarkably breezy for a game that seems forced to live forever in the shadows of two other titles. Firstly, there's the developer's earlier game *Mr Driller*, a title whose influence can be seen in *Trion Cube*'s oddball characters and ice-cream palette. Then, of course, there's the greater shadow that all falling block puzzle games have to live under: *Tetris*, a title that set the expectations for an entire genre.

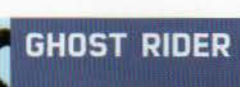
While its attempts to distance itself from *Tetris* occasionally seem arbitrary (three blocks rather than four; grouping in cubes rather than lines), *Trion Cube* does have some of its own ideas tucked away too. Rather than varying the speed of the falling blocks, the game alters the configurations of them, focusing on spatial awareness over twitch skills. *Trion Cube* also chooses to set itself apart by its emphasis on chaining: it's not difficult to clear blocks – in fact, it's often harder to keep them lying around – but the real gameplay revolves around growing a chain until it fills the entire screen.

The visual style may be charm-by-numbers, and there's no real attempt to use the DS's dual screens or stylus, but there's a solid enough puzzle game at the centre of *Trion Cube*. While the mechanic is simple, it's relatively pleasing, and throws up some mild variations along the way. The main problem is that, while instantly gratifying, the ease with which *Trion Cube* allows you to proceed means that longevity is sacrificed for immediacy – a crucial error for a genre that can't fall back on promises of greater spectacle just around the corner. Things do eventually become slightly more challenging, but you'll have to dig your way through to the later levels to find that out.

So, while it will make you feel like a master fairly quickly, *Trion Cube* has passed the point at which its accessibility becomes slightly ingratiating. Without the challenge and cruelty that can make a classic, the results here are likable, confident, and nowhere near essential. **[5]**



The storyline revolves around a captured princess, as usual, and a penguin-shaped spacecraft – which is less common. The narrative is given the whole of the DS's top screen to play out, but is hardly essential to the game itself



GHOST RIDER

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES DEVELOPER: CLIMAX

Given the mediocre, muddled and mangled *Superman Returns*, stock in superhero games has returned to something of a low point. Over the last few years, it's arguable that few games have matched the high point established by Activision's *Spider-Man 2*, a game that nailed the sensibilities and powers of the character and, importantly, his environment. *Ghost Rider* is ultimately no challenger to Spidey's crown, but what's surprising is just how solidly entertaining it is.

Perhaps that's unfair; but with the upcoming movie of the comic looking underwhelming, and given the fact that the character is one of Marvel's most absurd, *Ghost Rider* certainly has a lot to prove. And originality is not its strong point; the game is highly derivative, cheerfully appropriating the mechanics and focus of *Devil May Cry* and *God Of War* to deliver similarly non-stop combat and combo-based action.

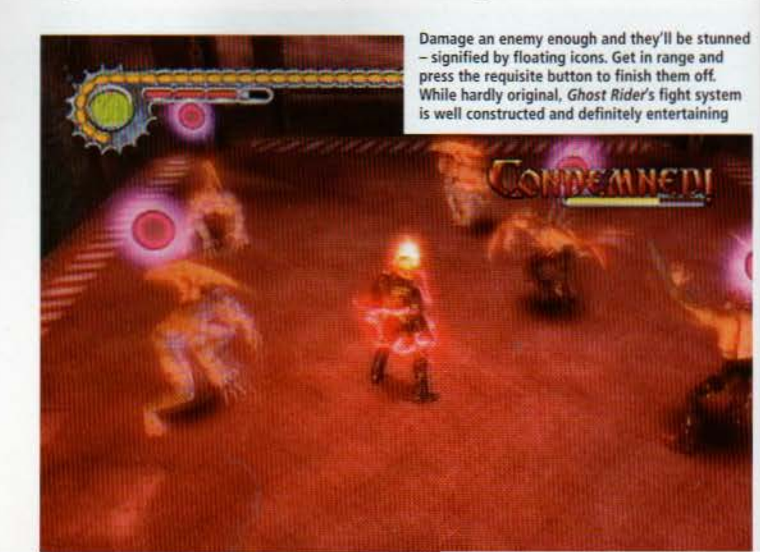
Crucially, however, it all works – and works well. Defeated enemies' souls are accrued and then spent on a wealth of combat upgrades (along with a generous helping of other extras), which allow for more involved and varied attacks and, therefore, combos. While it is easy, in the early stages at least, simply to wade through the game with little rhyme or reason to your combat approach, some enemies (such as the shielded demons) require mastery of the fighting system in order to be bested. It's a familiar system, and highly repetitive in the long term, but nonetheless viscerally satisfying, helped no end by some entertaining visuals and the infernal nature of our hero himself (his charged Penance Stare attack rarely loses its entertainingly over-the-top lustre).



Ghost Rider's Hellbike adds a little variety and is pleasingly robust, control-wise; the visceral thrill of sliding under low-hanging girders is surprisingly moreish, and the *Road Rash*-style combat is solidly executed. As with the rest of the game, however, the novelty soon wears off

The thirdperson combat alternates between Hellbike-based driving sections, notable chiefly for throwing *Road Rash*-esque combat into the mix. Nevertheless, the bike's various abilities (such as sliding under low-hanging obstacles in a shower of sparks), coupled with the solid handling, make these sections as compelling as the regular combat. Depth, such as it is, is provided by specific souls that allow Ghost Rider to both enter previously inaccessible areas and upgrade the abilities of his motorcycle.

While the appeal of *Ghost Rider* palls in the long term (the game is simply too samey, unless your thirst for fighting overrides your need for variety and pacing) it's a strong and well-considered title, even if is it one that is shamelessly imitative of other, better games. **[6]**



Damage an enemy enough and they'll be stunned – signified by floating icons. Get in range and press the requisite button to finish them off. While hardly original, *Ghost Rider*'s fight system is well constructed and definitely entertaining





ROCKY BALBOA

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (UBISOFT MONTREAL)



An expressive bank of punches are bound to the face buttons, then modified with the shoulder buttons. Several different eras of Balboa himself can be taken to the ring, but there's little to separate them

If going the distance against *Fight Night* takes a good game plan and plenty of heart, then *Rocky Balboa* goes half the distance. A kinetic, inconsequential knockabout, it wins points for noticing that in this handheld arena, where the lack of twin sticks reduces Total Punch Control to partial punch control, EA's champ is vulnerable. When the time comes for it to really go to work, however, it goes to sleep instead, wasting opportunities and sacrificing potential with incomplete modes and shaky mechanics.

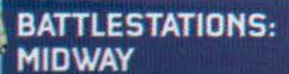
Contrary to prior suggestion, it features no story mode to remind players why they should care about its vaguely defined stars. There's a Historical Fights mode which bookends exhibition games with film clips and shortcuts to the main menu, but without senses of either continuity or progress, it's no substitute. With their lesser opponents, strict (but variable) time limits and obvious objectives, 'Fast Lane' bouts at least recognise the need for a noncommittal play option, but their backdrops of ghetto streets and gyms are suspicious. Was there actually a story here once, ebbing and flowing between main and incidental events? Was it dismantled to ensure the game synced with Hollywood's marketing schedule? It'd be nice to think so – that *Balboa* is something other than a moderate licence half-heartedly squeezed.

It could be worse, certainly: the game's set-up jabs, hammer blows and predatory Powermoods ensure second, third, and dozens of further winds to keep fights vital and unpredictable. But with little to differentiate fighters beyond base levels of aggression, symmetrical faces and notions of characters they're meant to represent, it doesn't take long for *Balboa* to flag, or indeed trudge to an unceremonious end. Given the number of losses sustained due to its dreadful knockdown minigame – a simple balancing act that's murder to gauge over ten hurried seconds – there's little impetus to make it even that far. A fitting sense of carpe diem, perhaps, could have made *Balboa* a more hopeful contender. **[5]**





Multiplayer is limited to ad-hoc only. The lobby is sparse, but at least there's an absence of lag as well as features



BATTLESTATIONS: MIDWAY

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC
PRICE: £50 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EIDOS
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (EIDOS STUDIOS HUNGARY)





The AI will steer until you touch the sticks, and does a fine job of it: riding along as a passive hitch-hiker proves to be a far more efficient education in the finer points of dive-bombing than the remarkably interminable tutorials

That this made it to the shelves at all marks the end of a battle more complex than any of those it contains. Fought under the banners of first SCi and then Eidos, approaching but never reaching fronts including the Xbox and Gizmondo, bombarded by disputes between publisher and developer and then left abandoned in the rearguard by new allies such as Lara and Agent 47, it has been marked by an unpredictability sadly lacking in the prospect of another trip to World War II.

And yet its time in the trenches has been kinder than might be expected, taking an intimidating conceit – simultaneously controlling sea, air, and sub-aquatic forces in the battles of the Pacific theatre – and successfully mapping it onto a controller that didn't exist when it first enlisted. A tap on the D-pad flicks from Hellcat tailfin to carrier deck to periscope, with capable AI grabbing the controls as they're released, and a challenge that could easily have overwhelmed becomes a rapid cycle of heroic attack and counter-attack that transcends the achingly over-familiar setting.

Unsurprisingly, this accessibility comes at the expense of in-depth tactical planning. This is most obvious in the earlier, lesser-staffed missions: while units are finite, ammunition is not – and with larger units capable of regenerating armour the results can be a long and tedious battle of attrition. Later sorties are more elaborate and present a more rigorous challenge of deploying and arming the forces at your command: at its peak, it's an experience that comes close to that too-rare joy of a *Battlefield* match unsullied by half-witted troops or imbecilic commanders, you alone deciding whether ship or squadron is leading the charge and watching every dive-bomb find its target.

But it's not quite slick enough to pull it off. Skipping through the hotseats starts to feel more like plate-spinning than military planning, and too often the already-lengthy battles are prolonged by ill-timed AI slip-ups. It's no console flagship, either – its epic gestation showing through in passable but below-par visuals with an occasional gleam that serves only to show up the comparatively crude surroundings – a roughness mirrored and then exceeded by a superficial and superfluous storyline.

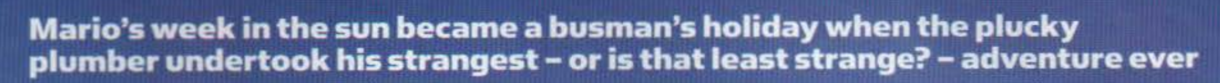
It's sure to be a more compelling experience online, albeit one that relies heavily on the honour of your opponents, and its rough-edged charm is compulsive: it treads the rarely-broken ground between arcade and RTS well enough to suggest future battles may be swifter and more decisively won. **[5]**



TIME EXTEND

SUPER MARIO SUNSHINE

FORMAT: **GAMECUBE**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **JULY 2002**



Mario's week in the sun became a busman's holiday when the plucky plumber undertook his strangest – or is that least strange? – adventure ever

"I lost it when I heard this was a four-star resort!" moans the Pianta in the open Hawaiian shirt, shades and straw hat, standing in the lobby of Hotel Delfino. "I mean, c'mon! Water damage in the restrooms? That is SO low class!"

Taking the hint, you scamper Mario and his payload of pumping equipment through into the toilets to examine the damp stain on the wall in one corner – and then, in a moment of clarity, it dawns on you. Mario, for the first time in his long, exalted videogame career, is actually behaving like a plumber. That's the exact moment, four and a half years ago, that your world – or rather Mario's world, Shigeru Miyamoto's world, the Mushroom Kingdom – fell apart. It has yet to be pieced back together. But still, at the time, you had to laugh.

That line, that moment, that exquisite little joke at Mario's expense and yours, sums up so much about *Super Mario Sunshine*, the most wayward and contradictory of mainline *Mario* platform games. Since when was Mario's honest vocation anything more than an excuse for giant pipes and blue dungarees? Since when did toilet cubicles feature in his games, or damp, or angry customers with hang-ups about status? (Not to mention sunglasses, Hawaiian shirts or hotels.) And since when did the humour extend beyond pure slapstick and surrealism to include social commentary and self-referential, post-modern irony?

Since when was Mario's vocation anything more than an excuse for pipes and dungarees? Since when did toilet cubicles feature in his games?

Appearing long after the GameCube's launch and six years after the last proper *Super Mario*, *Sunshine* bore a crushing weight of expectation like no Nintendo game – indeed, no game at all – since *Ocarina of Time*. It bore it much less confidently. To an extent, a follow-up to the epochal *Super Mario 64* was always doomed to feel flat, but many players still found themselves dismayed by what seemed a gimmicky, uneven and out-of-character entry in a revered series. Like its generational sister *The Wind*



FLUDD WARNING

Mario has always used power-ups, but never as standard; and on those rare occasions when he has company (Yoshi in *Super Mario World* springs to mind), it's as mute as he is. Not so in *Sunshine*. FLUDD, the back-mounted water cannon that also allowed Mario to hover, dash and shoot into the air, is also an irksomely talkative guide. In fact, the water cannon lead to some of the game's most inspired rough-and-tumble, and the Turbo and Rocket nozzles are classic power-ups, but the as-standard hover nozzle remains a deeply contentious dilution of pure *Mario*. Mario, above all other platform stars, really shouldn't need help jumping; it's almost (though definitely not quite) as bad as giving him a double-jump.

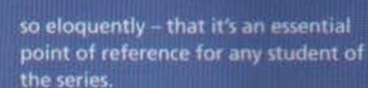




For all its idiosyncrasies, *Sunshine* shares that *Mario* hallmark that the game's designers are one step ahead of you all the way, leaving treats and tricks for you to find

Waker, it has become a controversial pariah amongst Nintendophiles, a symbol of the company losing its way and forgetting its priorities before its recent, DS-led reinvention. Although the *Zelda* game still attracts ceaseless debate, *Sunshine* these days elicits little more than embarrassed silence.

It deserves better. Not because, if you look past the niggles and contradictions, you'll still find the heart of a platform game of rare quality; that much should be taken for granted. No, *Sunshine* merits attention precisely because it's so wrong, or rather half-wrong. This fascinating, schizophrenic piece of work strays so far from what makes a *Mario* game a *Mario* game in some places – and yet, in others, defines it

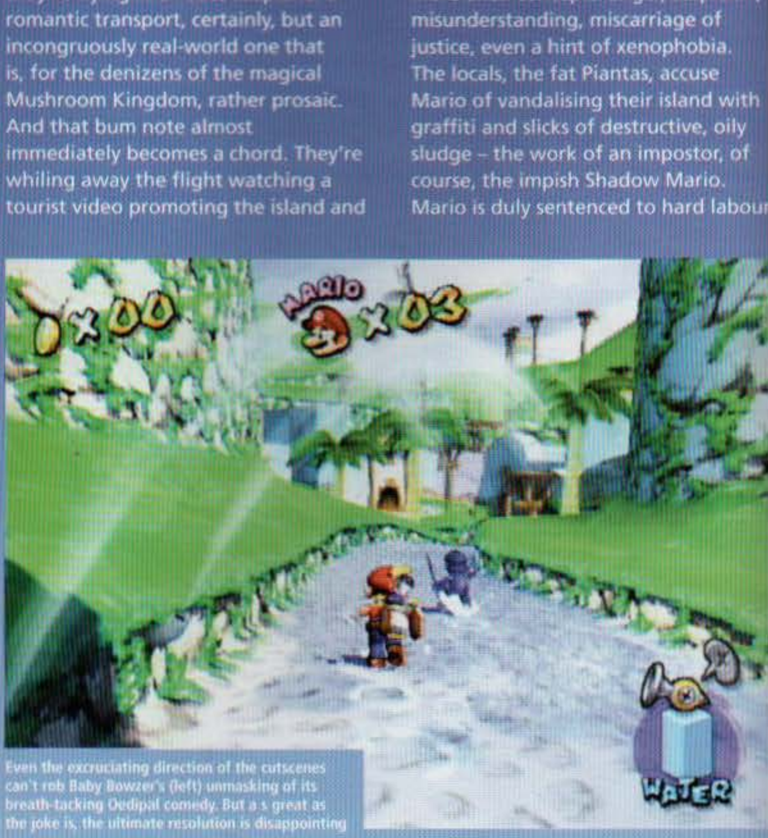


so eloquently – that it's an essential point of reference for any student of the series.

The first bum note is the plane. Mario, Peach and her entourage of Toads are taking a holiday on the idyllic Isle Delfino, but to get there they're flying in a 1950s seaplane: a romantic transport, certainly, but an incongruously real-world one that is, for the denizens of the magical Mushroom Kingdom, rather prosaic. And that bum note almost immediately becomes a chord. They're whiling away the flight watching a tourist video promoting the island and its resort facilities. Convenient plot exposition it may be, but in the space of seconds, media and commerce have been brought crashing into Mario's world, tainting and complicating its usual chaotic innocence.

When they land, they're met with more alien concepts: anger, suspicion, misunderstanding, miscarriage of justice, even a hint of xenophobia. The locals, the fat Piantas, accuse Mario of vandalising their island with graffiti and slicks of destructive, oily sludge – the work of an impostor, of course, the impish Shadow Mario. Mario is duly sentenced to hard labour





Even the excruciating direction of the cutscenes can't rob Baby Bowzer's (left) unmasking of its breath-tacking Oedipal comedy. But as great as the joke is, the ultimate resolution is disappointing









– cleaning up the mess with the aid of the robotic FLUDD pumping device, part tool, part sidekick. This convoluted setup is related in an unwelcome first for Mario – prerendered cutscenes – whose ugliness, awkwardness and leaden timing make their presence in a series known for instantaneous interaction all the more jarring.

Mario, it turns out, is having a holiday in reverse, and not just in the conventionally ironic sense that he's having to work. That strange plane has brought him from his home, an escapist, jolly nonsense-land where the hills have eyes and good and evil are simply defined, to a world very much more like our own.

A strange plane has brought him from his home, an escapist, jolly nonsense-land where the hills have eyes to a world very much more like our own

There's the architecture, for starters. The hub area is not a fairytale castle or idyllic meadow but Delfino Plaza, a bricks-and-mortar town, full of shops, talk and people who want things done; it would be more at home in a *Zelda* game. In fact it's a terrific adventure playground for Mario to practice his moves in, as Peach's castle was in *Mario 64*, but nonetheless he feels very much like a foreign element there, jumping over buildings rather than walking through them, bouncing off innocent heads, an expression of outsider mischief rather than heroism and joy.

There is a strange precedent here, though: the eerie (and quite similarly designed) underground town in *Mario 64*'s Wet-Dry World. Blank, deserted, boxed away and hidden, this location was a curiously haunting echo of the human world amidst all of that game's unbridled fantasy and imagination. Its enclosed drabness almost seemed a comment on the mundanity of our existence versus Mario's. Now, in *Sunshine*, Mario finds himself trapped in that very existence, albeit a more colourful and lively version of it. Later on, the game takes him to a windmill, a working docks, a theme park, a hotel. Tellingly, both the camera and Mario's irrepressible acrobatics struggle to cope predictably with these detailed structures, structures that were designed around a facsimile of something real, rather than purely around his moves.

The island's people also put it closer to our universe than Mario's. The Pianta may be outlandishly silly in appearance, with their coloured skin, huge noses, grass skirts and tree-topped crowns. But they are far more human than the more human-looking Mario and Peach. They are generous, capricious and demanding, quick to judge and quick to panic; more rounded, flawed characters than Toads and Koopas, but not necessarily more memorable or likable. There are even the beginnings of a sociological subtext on the erosion of aboriginal cultures here, as the Piantas' eager tourist industry is contrasted with the final level, Pianta Village, their mystical, ancestral treetop home.

So, although it later adopts the old tropes, Mario's adventure begins not in the normal way – a kidnapping, a rescue attempt – but with the plumber as a victim of circumstance, asked to earn his keep by doing chores. The usual pure motivations stay somewhat muddled throughout, even after Shadow Mario is unmasked and Peach abducted, and the theme of righteous toil (a familiar one in Japanese culture, but not in Mario's carefree world) keeps popping up. Clean up the oil slick on the beach for one Shine, roll huge watermelons to a festival site for another, turn your hand to dentistry and clean that giant eel's teeth for a third, teaching the kids a little lesson as you go. Making a family-friendly game is one thing, but using it as a vehicle for lectures on oral health is quite another.

A more adult twist is also added to the bare-bones plot that dares to make another, even braver joke at the





Later, more organic, levels lacked some of the kitsch, domestic charm of Delfino Plaza, even if their odd construction offered scope for unusual puzzle design




The island setting produced a real thirst for enquiring exploration, even if many sub-levels bore no spatial relationship to the main body of Delfino island

Mario games' own expense. Shadow Mario (itself more of a *Zelda* concept than a *Mario* one, implying dark-side duality) is Baby Bowser in disguise, and he eventually kidnaps Peach not out of inherited malice, but because he believes her to be his mother. In one stunning stroke, years of dirty playground jokes about Bowser's constant abduction of the Princess are tacitly acknowledged (and as silly as it is, Baby Bowser's claim isn't actually denied), and sex has reared its head in Mario's universe for the first time.

Of course, all of this is mere background for action that still largely involves running, jumping and collecting things. But that's just it – background, context, suggestion, these are things that *Mario* games, as a rule, don't have. There is usually no rhyme or reason to their perverted logic – and figuring that logic out from first principles is a great deal of the genius and pleasure of the series. In *Sunshine*, the logic has an uncomfortable amount of real-world baggage. Which makes its biggest contrast all the more stark.

Sunshine's prosaic world hides a secret. Several 'secret' levels in fact, accessed through portals scattered throughout the regular environments. They are the diametric opposite of the surface of Isle Delfino, going further into pure abstraction and getting closer to the essence of the platform game than any *Mario*, 2D or 3D, had dared to before. Platformers are primarily about guts, timing, agility and overcoming the fear of falling; *Sunshine*'s short, tough secret levels are about absolutely nothing else. They present you with assault courses of coloured blocks suspended, sliding and tumbling, in a bottomless void. Context, plot and motivation evaporate into nothingness here, and Mario is robbed of his otherwise constant companion and aid, FLUDD; he is reset in these levels to how he should always begin, but didn't in *Sunshine* – with nothing but a jump.

Visually, too, they retreat from the quasi-realism outside, and all the way past Mario's more traditional iconic surrealism into totally abstract minimalism. Some of the levels are like three-dimensional Mondrian paintings, just blocks of colour hanging in empty space. The figurative is mostly abandoned: a trampoline doesn't have to look like a trampoline, it's a flat brown square, defined by effect, not appearance. Oddly, the one detail is material – the blocks are made of almost tangible wood, plastic and glass, riveted with huge nails and screws. Scale is distorted, and Mario seems to be lost in a cosmic toybox of free-floating building blocks; this space is about anything but work – it's pure play.



The purer secret levels abandoned even the semblance of real-world sense seen here, but their precision and simplicity gave them a coherence which the rest of *Sunshine*'s unusually detailed fantasy world couldn't match




Sunshine stands up extraordinarily well visually today, much of which is down to the superb effects (water, heat haze, depth of field) and the overall plastic glossiness









The dizzying gantries and cranes of Ricco Harbour present some of the tricksiest platforming outside of the secret levels – either a good thing or a bad thing depending on how much of a purist you are

Notably, it's these levels, not the 'overworld', that most obviously inspire the look of its forthcoming sequel, *Super Mario Galaxy* (though that game's clever use of spheroids should negate some of the camera problems in inherent in navigating such free-floating constructs in 3D).

experiment. *Mario 64* brilliantly redefined the platformer for 3D, but it was a wild departure, and the revolution it started strayed in Nintendo's absence. *Sunshine* now looks like an attempt to reconcile where platform games were going – folding slowly into narrative action-

A strange plane has brought him from his home, an escapist, jolly nonsense-land where the hills have eyes to a world very much more like our own

Where most of *Sunshine* muddles and dilutes Mario's world, the secret levels present it so raw that it can be equally hard to stomach. By putting him in both an uncomfortably real world and an uncompromisingly unreal one, Nintendo stretched Mario to breaking point – some would say past it. But it was a worthwhile

RPG adventure – with their deepest, oldest roots. Most of the time it didn't succeed, but both fans and Nintendo learned a lot from the effort.

And sometimes it did work. Special levels like The Sand Bird Is Born (Mario is transported into the sky to ride a huge bird made of blocks of sand) had an effortless, free-spirited lyricism that no game since *Mario 64* had captured. And the central, though slightly underused gimmick on the ground – using FLUDD to clean up the slicks of slippery mud that blight the island – perfectly reflected another side to *Mario*: the messy, knockabout slapstick and tactile physics of *Yoshi's Island*. Somewhere between its extremes, *Mario Sunshine* provided just as good a definition of what *Mario* games are as a demonstration of what they shouldn't be. It has been said that sometimes you have to lose yourself before you can find yourself; here's hoping that Mario's holiday left Nintendo with a much clearer idea of his place in the grand, post-*64* scheme of things.



DINO CRISIS

Lost in the general air of confusion and disappointment over *Super Mario Sunshine* was the return of Yoshi, which ought to have been the cause of mass celebrations among *Mario* fans, so sorely was he missed in *64*. In fact, Mario's cute steed is brilliantly implemented but painfully underused, another sign (alongside its rather limited size when compared to *64*, and the make-work blue coin hunt) that corners had to be cut in development. Yoshi's huge, fluttering bounds are an exhilarating way to get around the levels, and his torrent of spit an excellent extension of his trademark bodily functions, but there isn't nearly enough to do with him.





THE MAKING OF...
SPY VS SPY

From comic strip to Commodore – if only all licence transitions were as inspired as this

FORMAT: **C64** PUBLISHER: **FIRST STAR SOFTWARE** DEVELOPER: **MIKE RIEDEL** ORIGIN: **USA** RELEASE DATE: **1984**

Rare's *GoldenEye*, David Crane's *Ghostbusters*: as licensed games go, classics are the exception rather than the rule. For every film tie-in that shows a spark of innovation, there are five or six which simply opt to become thirdperson brawls or corridor-strung FPSes. Back in the early 1980s the formula was even simpler: licences equalled platformers, regardless of what the IP was.

Spy Vs Spy, then, stands out as something different. It is good, it isn't a platformer, and it built on its licence in a way that managed to make it seem like a genuine extension of the core idea, rather than an anomaly or aberration. What happened?

The first secret to the game's success lies with a genuine love of the source material. "I'd been reading Mad Magazine for as long as I can remember," says the game's designer, **Mike Riedel**. "*Spy Vs Spy* was always a favourite, so this was a dream come true."

Riedel began his videogames career with *Bug Battle*, an Apple II *Centipede* clone he made while a student. Faced with a cheque for a few thousand dollars, his course of action was entirely understandable: "I dropped out of college, figuring I'd go back as soon as this videogame thing had passed. But of course, that never happened."

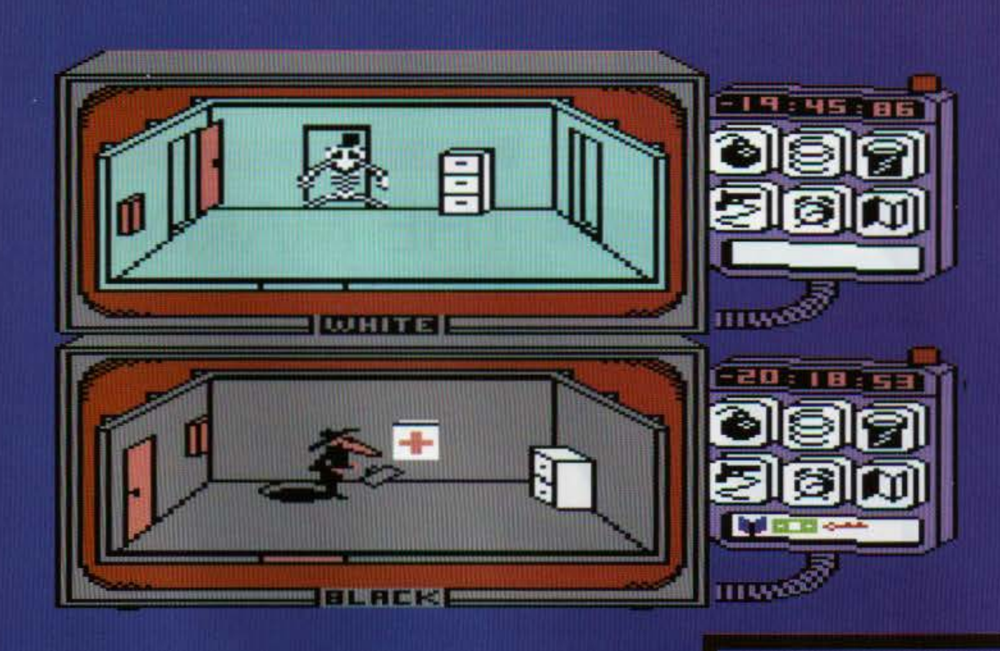
"I'd been reading Mad Magazine for as long as I can remember. Spy Vs Spy was always a favourite, so this was a dream come true"

Following a few games for the VIC-20, Riedel, at just 19, landed a job at Atari. "I got to port *Robotron*, my favourite game, to a computer add-on for the Atari 2600. Clearly, things couldn't get any better than this." They didn't. The add-on was cancelled, the game canned and Atari's New York office closed. Riedel was back as a freelance developer, which was when the offer to make *Spy Vs Spy* came along.



BALANCE OF POWER

The Trapulator, located to the right of the playing screen, is where each spy's arsenal of deadly tricks is contained. Ranging from bombs and springs to be placed in filing cabinets, to electrified water buckets to be propped on doors, almost all of the traps can also be deactivated by the enemy using in-game items. Only the timebomb cannot be foiled: if you're in the wrong room when the countdown finishes, you've had it.



Spy Vs Spy is the delicately gratuitous comic strip that has run in Mad Magazine since 1961. Created by Antonio Prohias, a Cuban émigré, it features the ceaseless battles of two spies, Black and White, as they maim each other with a series of booby traps. Simple, plotless and hilariously cruel, it's a perfect subject for videogames.

"I wanted to make it so you could play the comic strip," Riedel explains. "The idea for the game came about pretty quickly and naturally. I mean, the comic strip was about these two spies who were always trying to outdo each other with wacky traps. What better concept for a game could you ask for? I think it was an ideal licence."

The action in Riedel's game is set in an embassy made up of a number of rooms: two rival spies must scour the embassy's furniture to locate various items before making their escape. As both spies are after the same items, strategy comes from booby-trapping the furniture in order to kill the other spy during his search.

"The whole development process only took a few months," explains Riedel. "Granted, there was a lot of working around the clock with very little sleep, but the cool thing was that you went from concept to completion in such a short time." He still managed to run out of memory, however. "My development system was a souped-up Apple II, but memory and disk space were so tight that at one point I actually had to go through my source code and delete the comments because they were taking up too much space! Removing a few words here and there allowed me to add a few more lines worth of code. That sort of thing is hard to imagine now, when memory and disk space are practically free."

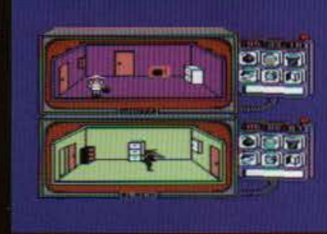
"I wanted to make it so you could play the comic. What better concept for a game could you ask for? I think it was an ideal licence"

As well as being a challenge to code, Riedel remembers the game as something of a turning point. "It was great having so much control over all aspects of a game – design, mechanics, programming, graphics, sound. But for me, this game marked the beginning of the end of working solo. The publisher had more input and control than in previous projects, which was somewhat frustrating, even when they had some good ideas. And I worked with a musician to write the music. In the end, collaboration made the game better, but it took some getting used to."

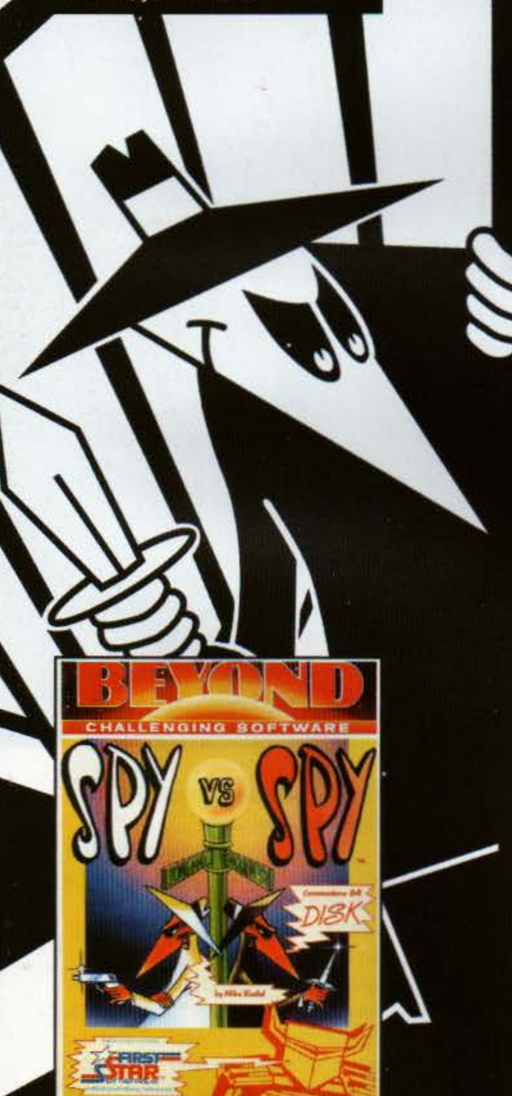
In terms of gameplay, the biggest obstacle for Riedel was creating a workable AI for singleplayer. "It was a big gamble going with a multiplayer design at the time because most people would be playing the game by themselves. If the AI didn't offer just the right amount of challenge, the game would have sucked. I think it came out pretty good but, just like today, nothing beats playing against a real player."

Ultimately, it's the fresh approach to multiplayer – an approach that has still not been copied – which really makes *Spy Vs Spy* stand out. Riedel allowed the source material to dictate a dynamic of conflicting needs, which made the game a compulsive snatch and grab: part race, part strategy. It was something of a rarity – a multiplayer game where all-out conflict was often the last option, and your best plans were hatched in relative secrecy.

"Too bad the internet wasn't around back then because it would have been ideal for that gameplay," muses Riedel, when asked how he feels his game has



Spy Vs Spy's splitscreen is made all the more endearing by the addition of the TV stylings – it's a testament to Riedel's involvement with the licence. The Trapulator, to the right of the screen, is one of 8bit games' greatest devices



The computer game market in 1984 meant that a videogame's creator was almost definitely going to get their name on the front of the box









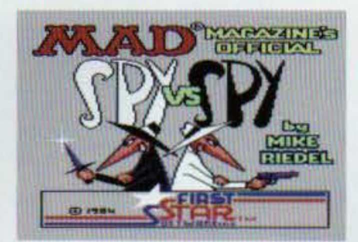

aged. "Ultimately, you look back at any game more than a few years old and they look pretty bad by today's standards, but what really matters is the core game mechanics. Good gameplay doesn't get old."

Following the game's release, Riedel wrote the ports for the Apple II and the Atari, as well as creating *Spy Vs Spy II: The Island Caper*, which contained several traps and ideas left out of the original.

More licensed games followed, featuring characters from Sesame Street, Warner Brothers, Disney, Hanna-Barbera and "so many more I can't remember." And a decade later, Riedel was to find notoriety as the designer of the *Postal* series. "The urge to do something original was too strong to ignore, and *Postal* was the result. It was really just *Robotron*-style gameplay with a twisted storyline. We thought it was fun, but we got an awful lot of bad publicity and a lot of retailers refused to carry it, despite the fact that they carried plenty of other games that were far more violent and bloody."

Riedel dropped out of the games industry after *Postal 2*, but admits that he's recently been tempted to return. The reason? Xbox Live Arcade. "Microsoft are saying all the right things about trying to attract new blood and innovative games. Hopefully it will turn out that way, although there's clearly the danger of it becoming nothing more than a place for big publishers to dump lazy ports of all their old properties. I like a classic game as much as the next player, but Live Arcade could really be something cool if they manage it properly."

And as for the elusive ingredient that made *Spy Vs Spy* successful where so many other licenses have failed, Riedel has his own theory that goes beyond programming skill or a simple love of the material: "Publishers like licences because they hope to leverage the existing fanbase and marketing. The idea is that everyone who loved The Matrix will want to buy the videogame. Unfortunately, licensed games are often rushed out under extreme

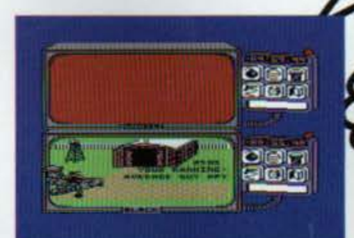


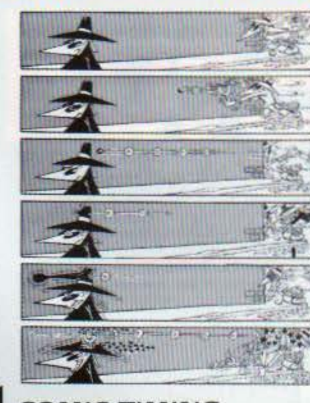
The comic's straight lines and simple designs made a transition to the screen relatively easy

time pressure and are often farmed out to second-tier development teams. Even if the developers are fans of the licence, they aren't given enough time or money to do it justice. In the end, nobody is happy with the results, but a lot of publishers just keep repeating the cycle, driven by hopes of making a fast buck. When publishers and licensers insist on a quality product and give developers the time and budget they need, the end result can be as good as any non-licensed game."

So, perhaps ironically for a game that featured such frantic action, it's time that allowed Riedel to create something memorable from his licence. Not development time, necessarily, but thinking time, the time needed to sound out the source material for the core idea itself, and then see where that might take him.

And the real prize for Riedel, even better than the pleasure of seeing a game played 20 years after its creation, was something more personal: a chance to meet his heroes. "Two of the most memorable moments from that time were having dinner with a bunch of the writers and artists from Mad Magazine and then later meeting Antonio Prohias himself at the game's launch party. It was kind of surreal meeting all these people whose names I'd been seeing in the magazine since I was eight years old. You don't really think of them as real people, and suddenly you're sitting there having dinner with them."


Upon finding the exit to the airport, the victorious spy gets to jet off into the sky (and out of the TV screen). A variety of grades are available at the end of the game, but the real reward is seeing your opponent exploding



COMIC TIMING

Like the cartoon strip, the traps in *Spy Vs Spy* (obeying the turn-based structure of Laurel and Hardy fights) worked something like jokes: you'd set them up, and then your unsuspecting enemy would trigger the punchline, all of which was visible on the splitscreen playing field. It's distressing for historians of in-game humour that few recent titles have managed to top the hilarity caused by seeing your enemy propelled through five separate rooms by a giant spring: hard to arrange, but well worth the effort.



Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: High Moon Studios

DATE FOUNDED: 2002

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 140+

KEY STAFF:
John Rowe, Rick Olafsson, Emmanuel Valdez, Chris Ulm, Clinton Keith, Farzad Varahramyan, Paul O'Connor



URL: www.highmoonstudios.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Darkwatch (PS2, Xbox)





High Moon's *Darkwatch* brought together the traditions of vampire lore and the western





LOCATION:
San Diego, California

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Two unannounced projects for next-gen consoles

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"High Moon was founded by videogame veterans who share a passion for creating original entertainment and a commitment to innovating within game development. Today, as one of Vivendi Games' leading studios, we are more than 140-strong with developers on staff responsible for some of the most successful games ever made.

Our location is a state-of-the-art facility designed specifically for making games, an architectural marvel based three miles from the beach in sunny California. We are growing, with space to expand as we strive to be among the top game developers.

"We have committed ourselves entirely to developing next-generation games. The impetus behind this decision was our founding philosophies, and the incentive was the vision of how our talented developers can harness these powerful new machines to create the kind of game experiences that will drive the medium forward. We have gone to great lengths to ensure that we are well positioned for the task, enlisting best-of-breed partners such as Epic, IBM and Autodesk, and by seeking only the most skilled to join our company.

"We have also empowered our developers to get us there, implementing an agile development method called Scrum that allows staff at all levels to have meaningful input. With Scrum, small interdisciplinary teams work on vertical, demonstrable slices of a game. The heightened communication, project ownership, productivity and constant evaluation that Scrum allows have had a positive impact on our studio's quality of work and our staff's quality of life.

"In addition to numerous art/development awards, our methodologies and collaborative culture have made us a highly regarded game company. We have received Workplace Excellence recognition for 2005-2006 from our regional HR society, and a place among IT Week magazine's 2005 & 2006 Top 50 Technology Innovators."

University profile

Like Top Trumps, but for universities

INSTITUTION NAME: University of Bradford School of Informatics

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 1,000

URL: www.inf.brad.ac.uk, http://www.bugrd.org.uk

CONTACT: 01274 235963 ugadmissions@inf.brad.ac.uk









Bradford's courses teach the techniques and methods used in developing content for videogames – and puts this into practice

UNIVERSITY OF BRADFORD



LOCATION:
Bradford, West Yorkshire

COURSES OFFERED:
BA design for computer games
BA computer animation
BSc interactive systems and video games design
BSc multimedia computing
MSc AI for games
MSc entertainment technologies

KEY STAFF
Dr Ian Palmer, deputy dean and senior lecturer in digital media
Professor Peter I Cowling, professor of computer science

KEY ALUMNI
Ben Hall – 3D artist, Electronic Arts
Ed Murphy – assistant producer, Rebellion Games
Greg Smith, – programmer, Rockstar Games
Nick Tresadern – artist, Creative Assembly

INSIDE VIEW – DAVID BENDING

"I've enjoyed all aspects of my interactive systems and video games design course because it combines both the artistic and technical aspects of the environments used within the games industry. You get experience in using industry standard software across all the modules – these cover each area of what goes into making a game: design, modelling, animation, programming, sound and networking. Obviously if you are more technically inclined you might find some of the artistic modules more difficult and vice-versa. But I'm lucky in the fact that I enjoy both these aspects, so for me the course is ideal.

"I think the biggest thing I have learned was the actual amount of work that goes into designing a game, from the initial design concepts to the implementation stages. There is a lot of work and pre-planning involved, which I think a lot of people just do not realise.

"Much of the final year of the course is taken up with projects, both individually and in groups. For my individual project I wanted to make a 2D vertical scrolling shooter. Originally I was going to use Macromedia Director, but then decided to switch the project format to XNA so I could produce a working game demo on an Xbox 360. In the end it was just a simple demonstration, but I was pleased with it and managed to present it, working on my 360. I had some issues along the way, but it was good fun – and having learned C# for XNA I am now using the language in an AI module this semester."



Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

GDC comes to the fore

Back in San Francisco for its biggest year yet, how has the demise of E3 affected the profile of the Game Developers Conference?



Back in San Francisco after a brief visit to San Jose, the GDC will be looking to build on its reputation at the Moscone Center this year

With the cancellation of E3, the Game Developers Conference steps into focus as the largest, and the most important, games-related trade show in the US. It's good timing too, as from March 5 to 9, the show returns to what's expected to be its new, permanent home at the San Francisco Moscone Center.

Like the industry itself, the conference has come a long way since a handful of friends first meet in the San Jose living room of designer Chris Crawford back in 1987. Now boasting attendances of over 15,000, it still maintains something of the camaraderie of those who actually make games, as opposed to those who spend money promoting them. Indeed, some of that original coterie, such as Stormfront Studios founder Don Daglow, MMOG pioneer Gordon Walton and Crawford himself, regularly attend – if only to lightly discipline their errant child.



GDC has been going for 30 years, and so for regular attendees the conference has a friendly and welcoming atmosphere, as demonstrated by the man who runs the in-show bookshop. He always does a roaring trade



The core of GDC consists of three days of quick-fire, hour-long lectures, an expo floor for tools and a jobs fair

Crawford's rants on the perceived dead-end state of current games being particularly incendiary.

Over the years, though, the conference, the core of which consists of three days of quick-fire, hour-long lectures, an expo floor for tools companies to show off and a jobs fair, has also acted as a fertile crystallisation point for related activities.

Hence GDC07 incorporates a two-day



Game design track

Perceived as the blackest of the arts that go into making a game, design talks are often the most interesting at GDC. For example, where else would you come across this? 'Every game is at some level an exploration of systems and rules. Modern games often leverage and reward our innate exploratory urges to motivate play based around exploration and discovery in spatial dimensions. This presentation examines the human compulsion to explore and the role of exploration in games, and investigates tools designers can use to allow players meaningful opportunities for self-exploration and discovery within their games.' And that's the task ahead for *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* creative director, Clint Hocking.

Another Ubisoft contribution comes from Nicole Dolensky and Steven Masters, who will be talking about applied patterning in the artificial intelligence of *Rainbow Six Vegas*. This deals with the transparency of decision making in the game, which had to be ramped right back. The talk will cover the techniques used to discover problems during play testing and how they were overcome.

An interesting take on redesign will be provided by Inis' Keiichi Yano, who's taking on the subject of morphing Japanese DS title *Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan* into *Elite Beat Agents*. The behind-the-scenes view promises to explain how the transition from male cheerleaders to secret agents was made.

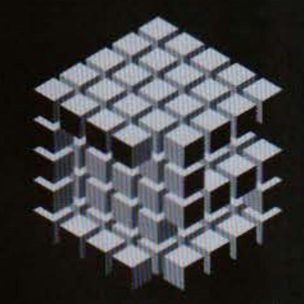


As well as the conference talks and networking opportunities, GDC provides opportunities for detailed demonstration of the latest game development tools





As well as the talks, GDC also features the expo show where tools and technology companies such as Dolby, Sony and ATI demonstrate their latest middleware



mobile game conference and a two-day serious games summit as well as events encompassing indie games and educational games. And for the first time, there's what's been archly labelled as GDC Prime. This invitation-only, executive-level event held across the road at the swish W Hotel will enable the Armani suit brigade to do their business within the warm embrace of the wider GDC atmosphere. Speakers include the general manager of EA LA, Neil Young; author of Everything Bad Is Good For You, Steven Johnson; and the CEO of the largest independent developer in the world, Jon Goldman of Foundation 9 Entertainment.

Back with the ordinary boys and girls, top speakers include Epic Games' Cliff Bleszinski talking about the design processes behind *Gears Of War*, while Midway's creative director, Harvey Smith, gets professorial on the subject of avatar psychology, or how gamers engage in self-expression through avatar creation and behaviour. Perennial GDC speaker Peter Molyneux will be on hand too; this year talking about innovations in *Fable 2* and promising to reveal a totally unexpected, and no doubt highly ambitious, feature.

Such notables apart, however, the charm of GDC can often be found in those talks that offer a glimpse of games not yet announced. It's unlikely there'll be another situation such as Will Wright's incredible *Spore* presentation in 2005 (which even caught EA on the hop), but nevertheless Sony Online seems to be talking about its latest MMOG based on DC Comics' IP as SOE's VP of development at the Austin studio, John Blakely, takes the stage with DC's Jim Lee on the subject of Establishing a Solid Working Relationship Between Licensor and Licensee. Mark Teare of Factor 5 will presumably also reveal something of PlayStation 3 title *Lair*, as he talks through the asset creation process for the dragon-riding title.

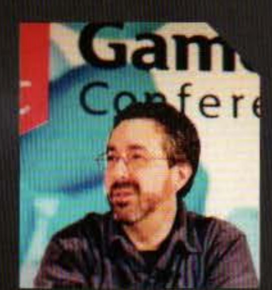
Another interesting session, at least for fellow coders, will surely be Rare's senior software engineer, Tom Grove, talking about the company's internal tools strategy in his talk entitled Shared Technology at Rare: Good and Bad, while colleague Michael Boulton will provide a detailed tour of the graphics techniques such as the large-scale displacement maps and non-deferred lighting algorithms behind *Viva Piñata*.

Business and management track

Thanks to the success of Steam and Xbox Live, digital distribution of games is the most lucrative option for developers at present. Hence pioneers such as Bioware's Ray Muzyka and Valve's Jason Holtman will be discussing how their early experiments have panned out, with particularly emphasis on how their business and revenue-sharing models differ. Taking a slightly different theme, albeit within the same commercial environment will be the anticipated return of Warren Spector to GDC. Together with Microsoft's David Edery, Firaxis' Soren Johnson and Obsidian's Chris Avellone, Spector will be discussing how PC games need to evolve in a world in which they're being squeezed by console games on one side and MMOGs on the other.



Peter Molyneux will be at GDC 2007, talking about the innovations that we should expect in *Fable 2*



One favourite son of GDC is Warren Spector, who will be explaining his latest venture in a PC gaming talk

Programming track

The steepest learning curve at GDC is always the programming talks, which often quickly revert into hardcore coding techniques, almost before the introduction is over. Amongst those pushing the envelope this year will be Crytek's Ivo-Jürgen Herzeg who's talking about the data-driven skeletal parametric animation system used in *Crysis*. Other juicy options appear to be Neall Verheyde and Simon Hatch from Radical Entertainment, who will be talking about a collaborative approach to shader development, while Pseudo Interactive's David Wu will be leading a round-table on physics. Perhaps more interesting to a general audience, however, will be Square Enix's Taku Murata, who will be providing a post-mortem on the programming required in **Edge**'s game of 2006, *Final Fantasy XII*.



With over 15,000 attendees and hundreds of talks, the conference is always a busy, and interesting, event





YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

BOSSES ARE DOOMED

BY JEFF MINTER

One of my most-played games recently has been *Doom* on Xbox Live Arcade. I've really enjoyed romping through the familiar old levels again meeting lots of awfully nice pink bulls and Barons of Hell – nice horns, terrible attitude. Playing an FPS with a joypad is much more relaxing when you only have to aim on one axis. It's a pity they couldn't have implemented one of the higher resolution *Doom* upgrades like JDoom and ZDoom, which would have surely looked excellent on my big plasma – XBLA *Doom* is just your stock *Doom* just like it was on the PC back in 1993. But it's one of those games where you don't really give too much of a toss about the graphics after the first few minutes because it just feels so nice to play.

Anyway, back in the saddle now, gaming time relegated to weekends apart from the odd go on the DS down the pub. I'm getting to quite a nice stage in *Space Giraffe*, after a recent union with Giles' code. I've been concentrating on installing necessary gameplay stuff into the extended Neon engine upon which *SG* runs, while he's been dealing with all the stuff necessary to communicate with Xbox Live (which, even for a fairly simple game like ours which just wants to chuck up an online hi-score table or two is still pretty gnarly). This has all been merged into one codebase now, and I can start a game, play through some levels, lose my lives and get to the game over screen whereupon my score will go up on the Live scoreboard and I can check my score against my mates or the rest of the world; and I can register Achievements along the way. The engine is pretty much complete, it does what it should do with Live; there's the skeleton of a proper game in there now, and in the next few weeks my job is to flesh it out with the levels that will actually comprise the game.

This means designing new enemies and implementing their behaviours, then gradually adding them to the levels as the player progresses. There don't have to be hundreds – it's enough that there are sufficient of them to introduce new ones every few levels, and then have their behaviour flexible enough that they can be made more challenging as the difficulty curve increases. And there's no need for bosses, since there won't be any bosses in the game. I'm not a great fan of the style of game design that states that you have to punctuate progress through a game with bosses, even though in a lot of games it seems to have become canon. I'd rather have my difficulty curve smooth rather than spiky. You will certainly encounter levels that have a particularly high difficulty every now and again, but they will be entire levels rather than boss encounters, and rather than bring you to a screeching halt as boss levels sometimes can, they may instead just cost you a few more lives to get through if you're not skilful enough yet. My levels don't restart when you lose a life, so even on a tough level, you'll still be able to progress if you've still got lives left.

> "I'm not a great fan of the style of game design that states that you have to punctuate progress through a game with bosses"

In fact I shall have the opposite of boss levels, in the form of Bonus Rounds, where you'll be able to play a chilled, floaty transition level where you can't actually lose a life but where if you perform well you'll be able to pick up extra lives and points – I found that the alternation between out-and-out shootiness and chilled floatiness worked well in *Tempest 2000*, so I'll be looking for the same kind of feel again, albeit without simply replicating what was in *T2000*. I've yet to design the bonus round for *SG* – I figure that'll get done after I populate the levels of the main game.

I really like that *SG* will never just stop you in your tracks. Too often with boss-based designs you'll get to some boss far into the game and end up getting frustrated. No game should ever make you replay the same little bit from the same starting point over and over and over again. Sure, in *SG* some levels will challenge you and drain your resources if you have yet to work out the best technique for a level, but you'll never get that feeling of being stuck which can drain the enthusiasm out of a gamer. Even beginners will be able to progress without ever coming to a complete halt on any one stage, and as players get better they'll pick up more lives on levels they already know well, and learn better techniques on levels that they find difficult, and progress a little farther each time without ever hitting the frustration wall to which boss-based designs can be prone. And instead of little peaks of frustration and shouting at the telly, you'll have little troughs of relaxation and chill, and an opportunity to restore your resources for the next part of the climb up the levels.

That's the plan, anyway; now all I have to do is implement and balance it so that it feels just right. And in its way that can be more challenging in itself than building the nuts and bolts of the game engine. It's the kind of thing that can't be taught or learnt from a book; it's all down to feel, and instinct, and lots and lots of cups of tea.

I'd better go and put the kettle on, then.

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser



Illustration: tatokes



THE GUEST COLUMN Postcards from the online universe

RESPONSIBILITY

In January this year, a homebrew RPG was entered for the games competition in the annual Slamdance film and media festival. Within a week, the festival's president, Peter Baxter, had banned the title from the competition. The game was *Super Columbine Massacre Role-Playing Game*, in which the player plans and carries out an attack on the school.

In cinema, with the rise of special effects, shock is now often mistaken for real drama – a criticism some levelled at Elephant, Gus Van Sant's cinematic treatment of Columbine. Is the same thing happening in videogames?

On the Columbine game message boards, opinions differ. To one anonymous poster, the game is 'the sickest fucking thing I have ever heard... I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm all for violence... just not in this way... This is a game about real people who were killed, doesn't anyone here care?'

"This is a game about real people, you say," writes **Danny Ledonne**, the game's creator in reply. "You're right, but so are...' followed by a list of games based on real-world wars.

"I think what this game has shown, more and more, is that it's not a matter of the non-fiction subject matter but how our culture has come to *view* that subject matter," Ledonne says. "The controversy *SCMRPG* generates that the aforementioned titles do not have everything to do with societal conventions regarding acceptable narratives – in films, videogames, etc. In other words: games about organised military strikes against opposing global powers are acceptable; games about organised civilian strikes against other citizens inside the same global power are unacceptable. This seems like something worth challenging."

In November last year, in Emsdetten, northern Germany, 18-year-old Sebastian Bosse took a gun and homemade bombs into his old school and started firing. He wounded 11 civilians and 16 policemen, then he killed himself. He played *Counter-Strike*, a fact that the German minister of the interior Gunther Beckstein latched on to. He has proposed amendments to German law which, if passed, would mean those who created, distributed or even played violent game content with 'cruel or otherwise inhumane acts of violence against humans or humanlike creatures' would face jail.

Let's face it: we don't enter into videogames to deal with our problems. We want a break from ourselves, a moment of levity. Violence in games liberates us from the real consequences of our own violent urges — takes us, as one London game shop used to advertise, 'Beyond Therapy'. Some studies have shown that children with computers at home perform slightly less well at school – and other studies have shown that constant use of email can dull our thinking as much as smoking weed. But there's an argument, too, that videogames make us less repressed by giving us an outlet for basic violent impulses that society cannot condone. In early 2006, Edinburgh police began a scheme to combat antisocial behaviour: they hosted weekly game contests between trouble-makers and police (the police tended to win at the driving games, the kids at football). Since the scheme began, the number of youth-related crimes in the area has fallen by half.

> "There's an argument that videogames make us less repressed by giving us an outlet for violent impulses that society cannot condone"

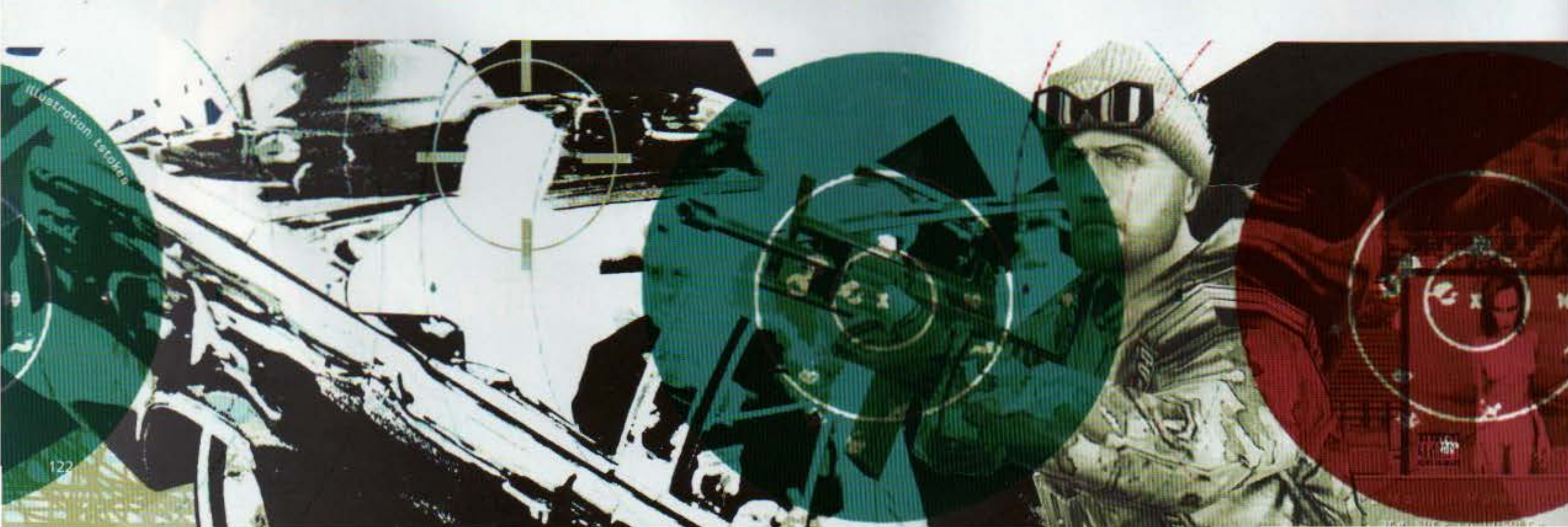
The point is not that game violence causes real-world violence. In both the US and the UK, in the period during which videogames were born and thrived, violent crime has steadily declined. The point is that games have become a front in a new moral war.

In 1997, two reporters at Fox's WTVT news station discovered farmers using a hormone, banned in Europe, to increase milk production. The farmers were reporting health problems in the cattle, but Monsanto, which makes the hormone, pressured the TV channel not to run the story. Fox asked the reporters to alter the story: they refused, and were fired. The pair sued – and lost on appeal. The court ruled there is no law requiring the media to tell the truth.

How long will this age of lies, in media and government, last? Eventually, as the financier **George Soros** has pointed out, reality will intervene. When asked why Bush's approval ratings were declining, Soros replied: "Reality. This administration believes it can manipulate the truth, but reality eventually manifests itself. That is what happened. Katrina was reality. Iraq is reality. People can't be deceived indefinitely." After the period when countries abided by the Geneva Conventions, what now seems like a brief time-out after WWII, we are entering a global age of might makes right. Everything now will be a struggle for position. That's why the Chinese government recently announced they were appointing a committee to examine online games for 'anti-national sentiment'.

Murder and war are serious, and serious things are what we want to leave behind when we play. The encroachment of moral police into our gaming lives shouldn't stop us enjoying the brief levity offered by videogames; but it should help remind us of our responsibilities to the world we leave behind when we play.

Tim Guest's book about virtual worlds, Second Lives, will be published by Hutchinson in April. Visit him at timguest.net



BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

THE MAINSTREAM PROBLEM

BY MR BIFFO

Almost everyone goes to the cinema, watches TV, listens to music and reads books, but not everyone plays videogames. It's the one area of mass entertainment which refuses to drag its lurid, chattering flanks before fresh demographic groups – and by crikey does that ever frustrate the strident dons of the games industry.

To date, the rulers of Gamington have sought to garner interest from previously disinterested parties by making the sorts of games that their marketing wunderkinds tell them said parties will like. Unfortunately, said parties have remained stubbornly disinterested, preferring instead to continue inhaling their entertainment fix through a rolled-up copy of Heat magazine. However many ponies, pink fluffy things and non-violent gameplay elements they contain, games seem unable to explode onto Joe Ordinary's to-do list.

My other half, for example, simply doesn't see the point of games. I often have to force her at knifepoint to play them. She views them akin to a painful chore, much as I baulk at the thought of filling out my VAT return, or performing dental surgery upon myself.

Making the Wii powerful enough – but no more – is an incredibly brave move on Nintendo's part, the gaming equivalent of Britain suddenly announcing the unilateral dismantling of its nuclear arsenal. There's no guarantee that its enemies won't blow it off the face of the gaming map, but there's no question that its audacious going-against-the-grain antics have got it more noticed than GameCube ever was. Indeed, for me, Christmas 2006 will forever be remembered as the Christmas where my parents went head to head on Wii bowling (and the Christmas when I ate a spoonful of ants – but that's an entirely different story).

> "Maybe it's about time we accept that some spread-eagled corners of society just don't like videogames, and maybe never will"

Perhaps where the industry's puppetmasters have been going wrong is that it is videogaming as a concept which girls and fogies hate; not the types of games themselves. Maybe they find something inherently off-putting about sitting down with a controller in hand, and intersecting with virtual worlds for hours on end. Maybe it's about time we accept that some spread-eagled corners of society just don't like videogames, and maybe never will.

After all, where games differ from films, books and music is that games are not like other forms of entertainment. Games are not a passive experience. For the most part you have to actually do something to play them – more than remaining sprawled in a chair, anyway.

Ultimately, the problem with targeting the mainstream is that to get the mainstream playing games you're really trying to invoke a cultural shift. It's not going to happen overnight, in the same way that introducing 24-hour licensing laws is not going to immediately change the way the British glug their booze.

Teaching your grandmother to suck virtual eggs at a family gathering – or play *Guitar Hero 2*, anyway – is very different to getting your grandmother to buy a Wii, and waste her retirement playing *Twilight Princess*.

I realised something recently, and that thing was that ordinary people – the people who don't read **Edge** – are sort of put off by what magazines and games fans define as 'good graphics'. What we view as the big games would be dwarfed by the sales of the biggest music CDs. I appreciate that *Gears Of War* has sold a couple of million copies, but if it were the biggest album of the year it should be selling a couple of hundred million copies.

There's a massive subculture of music too complex and layered to appeal to the majority, and I fear that, in a weird way, most – if not all – games fall into this category. Games, as a whole, are too complex for the majority of people. Or, at least, they look too complex.

If I were to show my sisters or parents – none of whom you'd describe as gamers – *Gears Of War* they'd shrug their shoulders. Yet expose them to *Wii Sports*, and they're snared. Waggle a DS and *Tetris* under their gaping noses, and they'll probably give it a go. Show them *Vice City Stories* and they'll go back to flicking crumbs out of their stretch marks.

I don't think Sony and Microsoft are misguided in chasing the graphics dragon – because there are those of us out there who are graphics tarts (and with the current pricing policies it's clearly enough of us to be profitable) – but they're never going to lure a mainstream audience when they're using the likes of *Resistance: Fall Of Man* and *Gears Of War* to showcase their consoles.

In all honesty, I genuinely believe that Microsoft is better off using *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*, or *Gauntlet*, to sell its machine. At the same time, I'm not convinced that doing so would be enough to make the shift. The Wii may make in-roads to the mainstream, but I think we're still a couple of generations away from the day when everyone plays games.

By which point we'll all be paddling around in three metres of melted polar ice, but that's beside the point.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



inbox



Issue 172

F

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Which game are we sending to a galaxy far far further away?

If man sent a capsule into space with the hope of it finding other life, filling it with information about the human race, music, films etc, what game would you put in there? Personally I'd go with *Geometry Wars* because it's lush and it's probably easy to play with whatever nasty excuse for a pair of hands they have. They probably haven't got a 360 to play it on though.
superbauer

***Wii Sports*. Because games should be for women, old people and aliens too.**
soggymuppet

***Destroy All Humans*?**
Blimey

***Space Invaders*: iconic and perfect for showing how we deal with aliens. They'll leave us alone.**
mandelbrot78

I suppose *ET* is out of the question?
Pause

I like to think that I'm a pretty sensitive guy: I'm fairly able to see most sides of a story, and empathise with whomever a situation is concerning. Through that, I'm able to come to an understanding and find a middle ground. It's because of that, however, that it troubles me when I say I cannot empathise with Carl Johnson.

Sure, I guess he can have some good intentions: he wants to get his brother out of jail; right his hometown from the way it has been sent by the evil corrupt police force and get nasty drug dealing off the streets. I'm sure that, under different circumstances, I could feel sympathy for his plight and want to support him in his endeavours. But as I played through *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, I realised that this supposedly good person I was playing as was a murderous psychopath.

All right: gang wars and drive-bys? He was pressured into it, and it is, supposedly, a way of life. Once in a while, I can give him that. But killing a dozen people, stealing cars and evading the police just to get a rhyme book for a talentless next-door neighbour wannabe rapper? Manipulating an admittedly unbalanced woman with promises of greed and murder, and then dumping her? Or any of the other senseless violence this guy has committed? I just don't think I can get behind that.

And that's the problem that I've run into with *GTA: SA* and, more recently, *The Godfather: The Game*. You can't make a sympathetic character out of someone who just committed a small-scale genocide of around 1,000 people in the past week. Like in *The Godfather*: my character just abused and extorted a truckload of independent businesses while killing a small country's worth of rival mafia families, and now I'm supposed to care about his love interest with his friend's sister? I'm sorry, but I think there are bigger concerns at hand like, say, the death penalty.

I enjoyed *GTA III* and *Vice City*. In retrospect, Rockstar had it right those times: it can be fun to be the bad guy. In *GTA*, you played a mute mercenary climbing his way up the criminal ladder. In *VC*, you played a sleazeball Tony Montana imitator in his quest to control a Florida resort town through drug dealing, violence and other objectionable acts. But not once in those games was I ever asked to care, sympathize with, or even like the people I was playing. That's why I can't feel for Carl Johnson.

I mean seriously, would you really like to invite a guy like CJ over for a couple of beers and some good times? I'd be afraid he'd shoot me, take my money and then use my apartment as a safe house for saving his game.
Lewis Hiigel

"Would you really like to invite CJ over for a couple of beers? I'd be afraid he'd shoot me, take my money then use my apartment to save his game"

Creating good game characters is hard enough without having to deal with the millstone of them being a mass murderer. Winning this month's DS Lite, by comparison, is easy.

Win a DS Lite for the best letter

When does a person officially become a gamer? Is there a period of enlightenment followed by a binge-eating session whereby one obtains a geeky persona? Do you need at least 10,000 Achievement points on Xbox Live? Or is it simply a matter of buying your first game and playing it to death?

It recently occurred to me that not only have Nintendo attempted to bring gaming fully into mainstream society, but they are actually succeeding in that regard. Millions of Wiis have been snatched off the shelves in the past few months. This means that millions of people around the world who would never normally buy a games console have just done exactly that and bought a games console which might eventually rival the iPod in terms of popularity.

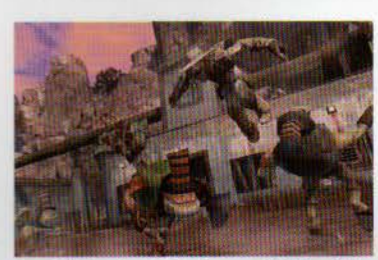
But is this a good thing? Are all the people who are hitching a ride on the great gaming train usurpers? Are we, the gamers of old, going to feel out of place in this new world? The PS2 brought gaming closer to the masses, but now it looks like the Wii is set to bring gaming into the centre of our culture – and away from us gamers. Once, we had something that seemed like it was special. Hell, it made us seem superior. Games for everyone? As if. Only now can we see how short-sighted we were. Today, gaming is for everyone and anyone. Not just for those who see it for what it is: the purest form of entertainment.

So what is to become of us humble hardcore fans? Are we going to be welcomed into the fold as interesting people who know a great deal about something which everyone now enjoys? Or are we old fashioned gamers going to be left behind to dwindle in a *World Of WarCraft*-infested den, whilst the rest of society moves on to a new gaming world full of motion sensitive wonders?

We must either ascend or become extinct. And once we have made that choice, we will know what it means to be a gamer.
Dan Brown

Officially? We tend to define gamers as people who play games.

Who am I? I am the greatest gaming machine ever invented. I am never late to market, never outsold and never exclusive. I have games of every genre and play style from the simplest of puzzles to major epics to rival the output of Hollywood. I cater to all demographics, all markets and all nations. Sure, I am a little more expensive at first, but upgrading me to the latest and greatest internals will cost less than a PlayStation 3. I can take every single peripheral you can dream of, all through a truly universal connection standard. I can display graphics to make the so called 'next-gen' consoles look positively 8bit. I also come in all shapes and sizes, from giant, neon-lit, water-cooled and over-clocked elite gaming stations to smooth onyx hi-fi black units smaller than a loaf of bread. I am all-inclusive. I connect my players to the worldwide gaming network that has been running and growing for 20 years and has a billion other players of all races and nations. Through me, every bit of information you could want to know, and quite a lot of information you wouldn't, is at your fingertips. I always reward creativity and I love indie designers, home-brewers and small studio developers. I enable a collective gaming voice of opinion and debate made up of individuals disseminating gaming news through a million gaming websites and podcasts, all of which can all be stored on my massive hard drives or synced wirelessly to portable devices. I outsell every other gaming platform because I am so flexible you can even work out your taxes while playing *Minesweeper*. And yet, for all my powers I am often described as humble. I humble? I whose mouse clicks can shake the very foundations of this world! I am the greatest gaming machine ever invented! I am a PC.
James Bell


Sam Wilderspin relishes how well *Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath* story matches its gameplay

"Are we any happier now than we were 20 years ago when you first inserted a cassette and, 11 minutes later, Dizzy appeared before you"


Lewis Hiigel despairs of ever being able to empathise with *GTA: San Andreas'* violent star

Funny how there's no grimmer thought than a gaming machine that can do your tax, and no happier thought than being able to postpone your taxes with a spot of gaming.

The madness has to end. I'm 26 years old and already I feel behind the times. The gleaming Adonis that is gaming continues to sprint boldly onwards, wearing a smile that projects perfection, and I watch it head for the horizon while collapsing onto a roadside verge, a scarlet-faced, wheezing wreck.

I've tried to keep pace, but the moment I was left bloodied and bruised at the wrong end of an opponent's Wiimote while attempting to play tennis, I knew it was all over.

Yes, forsaking wires means you are 39 times less likely to trip and fall through a coffee table. Yes, the overall experience is becoming utterly immersive and, yes, Wii is a funny word (and Xbox still sounds dirty) but things have gone too far.

Are we any happier now than we were 20 years ago when you first inserted a cassette and, 11 minutes later, *Dizzy* appeared before you in all his glory? Absolutely not.

And so, I shall return to the old ways; dust off my Spectrum 128K and 100-game with-purchase compendium (of which only 23 worked, and 14 of those crashed half-way through but *Fishing* was bitching – 'hit space bar now', 'you have fallen over and lost 14 hooks', nooooo), and fall in love once again with the heady days of Matthew Smith and the Oliver Twins, discordant loading noises and missing keys. Bliss.
Richard Birch



Topic: Gaming claim to fame

A band I was in a few years ago had a song on the soundtrack to one of the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* games... and some game about model planes that ended up getting cancelled. Anyone else got a gaming related claim to fame?
Blueprint

I was taught at college by a guy who applied for a job at Core. He didn't get the job. What?
OTOKO

Matthew Smith (*Manic Miner*) played *Halo* at my house! And on a much lesser note, I appeared in a photo within the very pages of Edge, very hungover playing in a *Timesplitters 2* tournament against David Doak (I kicked his ass btw).
VastikRoot

My mum used to work with the wife of the bloke who did the sound effects in the Bitmap Brothers. He got me signed poster when I was about 14.
bombfrog

I wrote *Knockout* for the ZX Spectrum, published by Alligator Software. Got paid £1500 for it when I was 15 and still at school.
TingTongMacaDangDang

I almost got into a fight in a bar in Glasgow with a guy who did the some of the graphics on *GTA3* because I told him that his game was 'for neds' and that he was destroying the childhoods of thousands of innocent kiddies.
Gremill

My girlfriend's ex-boyfriend's brother used to play for Cove Rangers and thus featured in many a *Champ Manager* game.
ScotsWahey

If we're going down that route, I know Ronnie Wallwork's auntie, and Ronnie has been in several *Champ Manager* games, and has also been in *FIFA*.
Diluted Dante

Darren Mackie, Aberdeen's prolific goal scorer, punched me in the face when I was 17. I also used to work with his cousin Martin and my mum knows his mum. Daz Mackie has been in *FIFA* too. I win on account of physical contact.
ScotsWahey

Ten hours, 15 hours, 40 hours, 100+ hours. The length of a game in such terms is relatively meaningless, yet there is often a cry for the completion of a game to log more hours. Then there is the issue of the story. How does this tie into a game's length?

The traditional, selectable mission structure can encourage experimentation and play within games such as *Halo*, but the story takes a backseat to the player's actions. The latest and largest *Zelda*, on the other hand, forces a linear path of progression for the player, and this creates a feeling of adventure, advancement and scale, but in something so long, the story is, again, pushed aside.

Developers need to understand that these structures are key to creating a successful 'story' in a videogame. In *Halo*, the player's memories are of events: the first ride in the Warthog,

Continued

the time a marine screamed something funny. Similarly, in *Zelda* the player's best memories are of places and puzzles: the forest temple, the secret to defeating that boss. Players should feel satisfied at the end of a game, whatever the actual length, but if the game is simply cut off with a little cutscene, this can't happen. In *Halo*, the end is marked by a departure from the standard play to the adrenaline rush of a straight race to the end producing a sense of overall accomplishment. The change marks the end of the game as well as the story. With *Zelda*, areas are finished with bosses to much the same effect. It is the changes in play that are signs of progression in stories told through events and achievements.

Stranger's Wrath is one of a few games to have shown a realisation of putting a story, something the games industry seems so desperate to use, into the feel and play of the game itself. Halfway through, the player is subjected to a complete shock as their persona changes form, but it isn't a simple visual change. Having just spent time racking up new weapons and upgrades, the player goes back to having nothing as a poorly proportioned, young and more innocent looking character. The player is in control of this almost goofy looking character and so feels emotion for him being an outcast and for the Grubs that become friends. As the awakened Steef, the player is then presented with learning a whole new set of weapons and you are quite literally finding your feet again. Just as your story picks up a purpose, your arsenal mirrors this in becoming more offensive. This relationship between experience and story makes the game one of my personal favourites, a wonderfully tight-knit and cohesive experience.

If the videogame industry wishes to be considered art, or to tell involving stories, there needs to be an understanding of the 'stories' that are told by playing a game, and the stories players create before there is any attempt at emotive dialogue or extensive back-stories. Perhaps we find this hard because, with so much new hardware and blind forward-facing vision, we can't pick up our copy of *Stranger's Wrath* and relive its experience every once in a while, like a good book.

Sam Wilderspin

One of the side-effects of gaming's obsession with film is how often it's forgotten that stories are about more than dialogue and plot twists.



Topic: Who owns an Edge T-shirt and do you wear it often in public?

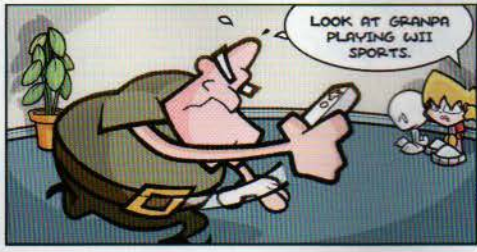
The new ones are pretty shit, the ones before were hardcore gaming tees, and before that you had cryptic messages that only fellow Edge readers would understand. Does anyone own any just described?
kookido

I wore one in public once, but I was beaten up by Lord of the Rings fans.
bogard

I have the exceedingly cool controller buttons beige one, but am usually forced to wear it beneath other more concealing garments in the style of a BA employee's religious jewellery.
Padster

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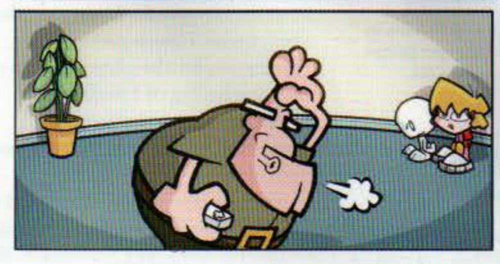


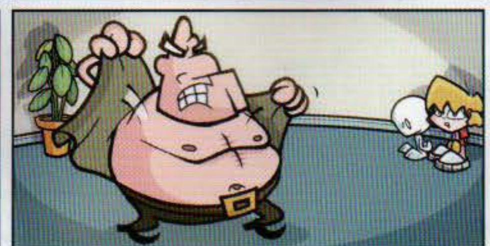


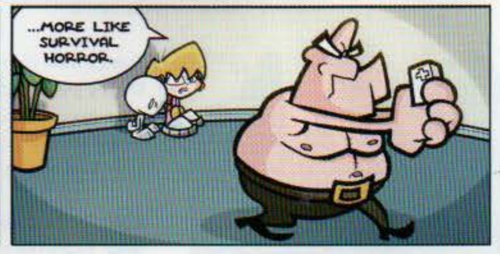












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